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Lasso Jack, THE YOUNG MUSTANGER.

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"KEEN-KNIFE," ETC.

CHAPTER I. THE FUGITIVES.

Low along the western horizon—that distant boundary of the vision—upon a wild Texan prairie, a dark cloud was rising from behind the level of the plain and drifting rapidly, and in a direct line, along the bosom of the green expanse, at the same time standing plainly outlined against the azure blue of the midsummer's sky.

Was it a storm-cloud floating over that great green ocean? What else could it have been? Still it seemed singular that a cloud would thus rise and float away in a volume over the plain, as though borne upon a strong head-wind.

A casual observer standing upon the eastern extremity of the prairie would have discovered at once that the cloud was approaching him. And soon he would detect a dull rumbling, like that of distant thunder, and also, the sound of human voices issuing from out that cloud—human voices that were high and fierce with wild emotions.

Then the observer could readily tell that that dark mass was no storm-cloud, but a cloud of dust thrown up by the flying feet of horses, the pounding of whose hoofs on the hard, dry plain he could distinctly hear growing plainer and plainer each moment. And as the cloud, driven rapidly down before a strong head-wind, drifts further eastward, a band of horsemen can be distinguished within it.

There were over three score of them, and they are all covered with dirt and their faces are begrimed with sweat and dust and contorted with wild excitement. Most of them are half-naked, and their breasts and arms are streaked and ringed with pigments of piebald colors.

Bright spear-heads bristle and flash above their plumed heads, and rifle-barrels glimmer in their hands.

They are mounted upon clean, strong-limbed ponies that are reeking with sweat and foam, and they all, with

but a few exceptions, ride bare-back, for they are a band of Comanche Indians.

The cause of their wild, swift riding was readily perceived; a few hundred yards in advance of them two fugitives were riding for their lives!

They were both white men. Their faces were bronzed by exposure to the sun and wind, and begrimed with dust and dirt. They were young men—almost boys. They were dressed in garbs of buck-skin, and armed with the weapons of bordermen and carried the accoutrements of mustangers.

The younger of the two was not over twenty years of age—a perfect model of manhood and grace. His eyes were of a dark brown, and from their depths shone a pleasant light that was indicative of a wild, dashing spirit.

He was mounted upon a neat-limbed and spirited clay-bank mustang that was caparisoned with a light bridle and fine Mexican saddle.

At the bow of the latter, hung a lasso of rawhide, with which its owner had won an enviable fame as a mustanger.

This gallant young knight of the prairies was the renowned Lasso Jack.

The other fugitive from the yelling savages was a few years older than his companion, but he was a fair specimen of noble and vigorous manhood, quite rivaling Lasso Jack in many points of physical development. He bestrode a spirited animal and was armed and equipped as was his friend.

This youth was the daily companion of Lasso Jack, and answered to the name of Henry St. Elmo.

For upward of two years had these two young men been engaged in capturing wild horses on the prairies of Texas, and had made the business a lucrative one by running their stock to the nearest trading-post, where they could always find ready market.

On the morning of the day that we introduce them, the young mustangers had, in pursuit of their vocation, ventured too far into the Comanche hunting-grounds, and running across a large war-party, journeying southward, they were compelled to turn and flee.

Then began a long and fearful race across the great prairie beneath the broiling summer sun, and it was hours afterward that they first burst upon our view, far out upon the plain.

For hours the fugitives had sped on in silence, now and then glancing back to note their proximity to the foe.

"This is getting to be a pretty warm chase," Henry St. Elmo finally said. "I fear our ponies are beginning to give way, and, in case they do, our hair is bound to be raised by a Comanche scalping-knife."

"That may all be, friend Harry," replied Lasso Jack, "but you must remember that the savages' ponies are failing, too, and that they are as far behind us now as when the race first began. I believe yet, that nothing but accident to us will determine the chase in the Comanches' favor, and you can rest assured, Henry, that fair object of your dreams will not stand in need of your strong arm long."

St. Elmo smiled hopelessly at his friend's allusion. It was a critical moment for Henry to indulge in any pleasant anticipations, with that horde of shrieking demons thundering at their heels for their scalps."

"It is a long way to the San Saba timber, Jack, and



A HUMAN HAND AND ARM WERE THRUST UPWARD THROUGH THE EARTH!

until we reach its cover we can not elude these howling devils."

"That's all very true, St. Elmo; but, look ahead yonder: does it look to you as though there was a dark line running at right-angles with our course across the plain?"

St. Elmo looked in the direction indicated, and replied:

"Yes, Jack; it's a fringe of bushes on the banks of a small stream coursing its way across the plain."

"By heavens, that is bad!" exclaimed Jack; "if its banks are too steep to admit of our crossing it, these red hounds will get us, sure."

The fugitives rode on, and, as they approached the object in question, they found their worst fears confirmed. A small stream was before them. Its banks were fringed here and there with clumps of willows and tangled sage-brush, overgrown with dark-green parasites.

Yell after yell now began to peal from the Comanches' lips. They knew that the stream was before the fugitives, and felt certain of their capture, for they were satisfied they could not cross the creek. And, to prevent the mustangers' escape either up or down the stream, they began to scatter out, some going to the right and some to the left.

The mustangers saw their appalling situation in a moment.

"We're goners, Jack, sure as 'guldy!'" exclaimed St. Elmo; "we can never cross that creek with our animals, and we can not turn either up or down the creek, for the red varlets are spreading out to cut us off."

"I am sure the stream is not so very wide, nor the banks so high but what our animals might leap it. We had better try it, for it is our only chance of escape. If we succeed—"

"By Heaven, look there!" suddenly exclaimed St. Elmo, pointing ahead of them toward a clump of bushes on the opposite side of the creek.

"What is it, St. Elmo, what is it?" asked Lasso Jack.

"There are Indians in that clump of bushes before us on the opposite side of the stream!"

"You are surely mistaken! I see nothing!" replied Jack.

"Nor do I now; but I did see the flash of a gun-barrel, and a plumed head drop in the bushes when I first spoke."

"Well, we will have to take our chances for life, Henry," said Jack. "If there are Indians over there, our cake is dough and there will be a probability of our scalps ornamenting Comanche lodges—ah!—there, by Jupiter! I saw the Indian's head and face, and if I mistake not it was an Apache. If so, you know the Comanches and Apaches are at war now, and both tribes are our enemies. How our chase will end, there is no telling, inasmuch as there are three parties concerned. But, here we are, St. Elmo,—on the bank of the creek. We can leap it—forward—over, my noble steed—hurrah!"

They reached the bank of the creek, Lasso Jack a few feet in advance. With a slight pause to gather momentum, the animals, in obedience to their riders' command, made a fearful leap and landed safely on the opposite shore.

Lasso Jack was still in advance of his friend, and with a shout of triumph and defiance, he put spur and dashed on, shouting to St. Elmo to follow.

Jack never gazed back. He had now entered into the excitement of the race with all the fervor of his daring, dashing young spirit. Close behind he could hear the tramp of the hoofs of St. Elmo's horse, and still further back, he could hear the heavy thud, thud of the hoofs of the Comanche horses leaping the creek. He could hear their enemies' triumphant shouts, and now and then a rifle would crack, and a bullet whistle in unpleasant proximity astern his head.

But still the daring young mustanger led on, even and anon shouting to his companion who was still behind.

It was a wild, fearful chase, yet Lasso Jack experienced no fear for his own safety, for in point of speed he had never found an equal for his animal on the Texas prairies. His greatest fears, however, were for his beloved companion, Henry St. Elmo. Still, the horse of the latter was holding out well, for close behind he could still hear the steady thump of his hoofs.

"Come on, Henry," he shouted back; "a few miles more and we will strike the San Saba timber. This is a little the most exciting chase I ever indulged in, for we're scattering miles behind us, at lightning speed. But is your horse failing any, old friend?"

There was no response to the young mustanger's question.

"Is your animal failing, St. Elmo?" he repeated.

Still there was no response.

"What ails you, Henry?" asked the young man, turning his head and gazing back the first time since he had crossed the creek; "can't you hear, or— My God! where is he?"

Close behind his own animal followed that of St. Elmo, but it was riderless!

Henry St. Elmo was gone—missing from his animal's back!

CHAPTER II.

IN CAMP.

At the close of the same day on which our story opens, a little band of emigrants, if such they might be called, went into camp in a little grove on the banks of a small stream that emptied its waters into the San Saba River. The party numbered some two-and-twenty persons, and all were men but two. These were young girls just budding into womanhood.

The eldest of the men, and the leader of the party, was a man upon whose head were stamped the frosts of fifty winters. Still he was strong and robust as any man in his party. He was kind and generous hearted, yet possessed of the imperativeness of speech of one used to giving command, and of that erect, dignified carriage of form that comes of long military life and training.

In fact, Captain Louis Gray had spent most of his life in the service of his country, and although he loved and adored the gentler sex, his heart had remained untouched by Cupid's dart.

At the time when we introduce him to the reader, he was serving his country in a garrison on the Texan frontier, with the rank of captain. A short time previous to the opening of our story he had been granted leave of absence, with the commission of a recruiting officer; so, while visiting with friends in his native place, he had obtained as recruits for his own company, nine of the young men now accompanying him.

Nine of the others were traders, bound for Santa Fe. They consolidated their forces with that of the captain for mutual protection against the Indians and prairie pirates that infested the country, south and south-west of Red river.

There was another person in the party that demands our attention. He was an Englishman, and gave his name as Sir George Richardson. He claimed to be a scion of one of the first families of England, but having become bankrupted by wild speculation, he left his native land for America, where he hoped to retrieve his lost fortune. He came direct to St. Louis, and there hearing of a party of traders fitting out for Santa Fe, he was fired by a spirit of adventure, and applied to them for passage in their train across the plains.

The traders saw that he was a man possessed of rare abilities. There was a free, dashing air about his movements that told of an adventuresome spirit; and in his dark-gray eyes was a peculiar twinkle indicative of an inexhaustible mine of humor and pleasantries—just such as always make a desirable companion; and so the traders at once granted him passage in their train, and before they had been out a week, they found that he fulfilled all their desires of an entertaining traveling companion.

Although he had now become an American, he still retained some of his English customs. He wore side-whiskers, English clothes, and carried a gold-headed cane, that was never out of his hand only when he slept, and then it was always by his side.

The two young females in the party were nieces of Captain Louis Gray. They were sisters, and having lately become orphans by the death of their father, their uncle, Louis Gray, had volunteered himself and men as an escort to take them to their brother, who was then a leading merchant trader in Santa Fe, and who had earnestly solicited his young sisters to come and make their home with him.

Mabel Garfield was about eighteen summers of age. She was tall and queenly in stature, with light golden hair, blue eyes and a clear complexion that rendered her sylph-like beauty and delicately defined features exquisite in their modesty and loveliness. She was mild, kind-hearted and susceptible of all the gentler emotions of the human breast, yet she was of a nervous temperament, and painfully sensitive of all the dangers that beset their path, and it was only the double assurance of her uncle that had ever induced her to begin the journey at all.

Mabel's sister, Rosalind, was nearly two years younger than she, and was the opposite of her sister in every respect. She was a little brunette, with dark eyes and hair, and a dimpled

chin. She was full of life and merriment, and could use a rifle with all the skill of an old gunner, and there were no dangers that she feared, nor any adventure that she did not crave.

There were ten wagons in all, most of them belonging to Santa Fe traders. They were all drawn up, "tongue and tail," in a circle around the camp, while the horses were corralled on the edge of the prairie, hard by.

Three or four camp-fires had been lighted, by which to prepare supper.

So far, all had enjoyed the trip exceedingly well, having met with no trouble or danger in any form.

Old Dan Dorne, the guide, furnished the party with an unusual amount of border stories, while Sir George Richardson spiced the whole with his mirth-provoking pleasantries. But it was readily perceived, by the observing, that much of Sir George's fine language was intended for the ears of Rosalind Garfield, for since their sojourn together, his attentions to her had been quite frequent.

The golden sun hung just above the horizon, when the little band seated themselves to partake of their evening meal. While thus engaged, one of their number happened to glance upward among the tree-tops, and saw that which caused him to cry out with sudden surprise and alarm.

"What is it, Hale?" asked Captain Gray.

Hale raised his hand and pointed upward. Every eye was at once turned in the direction indicated and saw, half-way up a tall, hollow tree, a human skull with a small round hole in the forehead. It was fast in a hole in the side of the tree, and seemed to be looking down upon our friends and grinning in a ghastly manner.

"By golly!" exclaimed old Dan Dorne, the hunter-guide, looking about him as if to recall something of the past; and then, as a light of recognition lit up his eyes, he continued: "I sw'ar, friends, I remember this spot, for all it's been ten years since I war here. And that thing up thar—I know all 'bout it, for it war I that fixed it thar."

"Ah!" exclaimed the captain; "tell us about it, Dan."

"Well, Cap, it's not much o' a story; but 'bout ten years ago, a party o' us had camped 'bout two miles from here, and I went out in search o' game for supper. I got nigh this very spot when I hear the plain gobble o' a turkey. I know'd at onc'e the gobble warn't ginewine. I war satisfied it war an Injin's decoy, and so I concluded to take the varlet in outen the wet. So I slipped along through the woods, and as I advanced I found the gobblin' seemed to come from up in the air, and so I stopped and went to peekin' about, and what should I see but an Injin's head and face, thrust partly through the hole where ye now see that skull. Quick as wink, I up with ole Knock-em-stiff and sent a bullet squar' through his for'ead. And if ye'll look sharp, ye kin see the hole in the skull now."

"How do you know that is the same skull?" asked one of the recruits.

"I know it is, fur when I shot the red, he didn't drap. His head got wedged into the hole, somehow or other, and there it has remained ever sence."

"Ah, hindeed!" exclaimed Sir George; "that hincident is quite worthy hof my note-book. You may see that hin print some day, Mr. Dorne, for hI propose to write a book when hI get over to Santa Fe—a book hof hour journey across the prairies of Texas."

Supper was finally over with, and while the men were making arrangements for the night, Mabel and Rosalind strolled leisurely out into the woods.

All day, Mabel had been unusually silent and nervous. Rosalind did not fail to notice it, and when they were alone she asked:

"Mabel, why are you so sad and uneasy today? I hope you are not home-sick, now that we are so near brother Arthur."

"No, no, sister; it is not that," returned Mabel. "But you remember the letter I received a few days before we started on this journey, do you not?"

"Yes—oh, yes; I had nearly forgotten about that. It was from Henry St. Elmo, written in reply to yours, in which you told him of our proposed journey to Santa Fe."

"Yes, exactly."

"I remember it well; and he wrote he would meet us, with a friend of his, at—at—where was it, Mabel? I have forgotten."

"He wrote he would meet us on Clear Creek, a tributary of the San Saba river."

"Then why are you fretting? Henry will surely keep his word."

Lasso Jack.

"It may be he will, sister; but the time is up now for his meeting us. I heard our guide say that the creek upon whose bank our camp is located is called Clear Creek."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Rosalind; "then we may expect Henry at our camp to-night."

"We may, sister; but I fear he has—"

"Forgotten his promise, or become false to you?"

"No, no, Rosalind; Henry St. Elmo could never become false to me, nor forget a promise. He is too manly and noble-hearted for that; but I fear something has befallen him, or we should have found him here."

"You should not put too much confidence in him, Mabel," said Rosalind, with a smile; "men are all fickle-hearted, and some dark-eyed Mexican señorita may have won Henry's love away from you."

"Oh, Rosalind! I could never think so of Henry."

"And yet it may be so," persisted Rosalind.

"If there are impossibilities in this world, I think that one of them," said Mabel.

"I hope so, for your own sake, dear sister; still I would not worry and fret about his not coming. He may have been delayed, and will join us yet. But hark! What is that?"

"Horses' hoofs out upon the plain," said Mabel, and her eyes lit up with a joyous light. "It may be Henry, now."

Rosalind stepped upon a fallen log and tried to obtain a view of the horseman or horsemen, whichever it was, but the intervening undergrowth concealed all from her view.

They listened. They heard the hoof-strokes growing plainer and plainer. Then there suddenly arose a fierce yell, mingled with the clash of fire-arms.

Filled with sudden alarm, Rosalind and Mabel turned and fled back to camp. When they reached it, they found the men with rifles in hand, waiting the approach of the unknown horseman.

CHAPTER III.

THE YOUNG MUSTANGER'S LIFE-STRUGGLE.

WHERE was Henry St. Elmo?

There ran his horse, but riderless!

Lasso Jack was riding alone over the trackless prairie, and St. Elmo was—

We shall see.

When his animal made the fearful leap that carried it across the stream, the girth of his saddle snapped, and the horse shot like an arrow from under both saddle and rider, and galloped after its mate.

The unfortunate young mustanger fell full length into the creek, and was lost from view of those behind him; but, knowing the savages were close at hand, and that there was no possible chance of recovering his horse, he kept himself upon his back in the water, which, at this point, was about three feet deep.

The next minute he saw a number of dark forms leaping the water-course, and heard the pounding of hoofs on each bank. A perfect cloud of dust and dirt was thrown back by the horses' feet, completely concealing him from view; and finally, when the last savage was across, and he heard their retreating yells, he saw that his mishap had been unnoticed. A gentle swell in the prairie, just before the creek was reached, must have concealed him from the savages' eyes, at the same instant that he rolled into the creek, and as his horse followed on after Lasso Jack, half hidden in a cloud of dust, the savages failed to notice his absence from his animal's back.

He heard the retreating savages away on the plain, and felt that for the moment he was safe.

Had he forgotten the Indian seen in the clump of bushes?

A single thought sufficed to alarm him, but before he could act, two rifles—one on each side of the creek—rang sharply out, and with a cry, as of mortal agony, Henry St. Elmo staggered forward, clutching at his breast, and sunk heavily to the earth, on the further bank of the creek.

Then forth from each of the thickets over which a puff of smoke now hung, issued an Indian warrior, with a scalping-knife in one hand, and the smoking muzzle of a rifle in the other.

One was an Apache, the other a Comanche warrior—deadly enemies.

Each one had been concealed in the thicket, and was unaware of the other's presence. The rifles of both had cracked simultaneous, and the reports were blended as one. Each one had no other thought than that he had slain the white man, and now stepped forward to claim his scalp, and complete his victory. But they came to a sudden halt, and glared at each other like two maddened wild beasts preparing to leap.

Both were powerful fellows, about equal in size and strength. They recognized in each other an enemy, and all the deadly hatred of their savage nature was manifested in their fierce, vindictive expression. The lifeless form of the pale-face before them was forgotten, and as the war-cry pealed from their lips, they rushed together and grappled in a terrible hand-to-hand conflict.

Like serpents they became locked in pliant folds, and fought with knives, feet and teeth, in the meantime whirling over and over in such rapid evolutions that their bodies seemed incorporated into one. They fought in silence only as two such fearful foes can fight. Common men would have been exhausted in half the time. They seemed possessed of supernatural endurance, and for fully an hour no one could have told on which side the advantage hung. But, finally, the Apache began to show signs of failing strength. His efforts were less desperate, and his breath came quick and in labored gasps from between his teeth. Blood and foam were gathering upon his lips, and his starting eyeballs shone with a deadly glare.

A hollow groan soon told that life with the Apache was at an end. Then the Comanche sprang to his feet and uttered a fearful war-cry. A scalp was in his hand and before him lay the lifeless form of the Apache. But, he had paid dearly for his victory. He was cut, bitten and bruised in a fearful manner, and was bleeding from more than a dozen painful wounds. The stimulus of victory and excitement was all that kept him up, and as these began to wear off, he realized the danger he was in—the danger of bleeding to death. So, divesting the dead Apache of some of his garments, he tore them into shreds and rudely bandaged his wounds.

Walking out from the creek a few paces, he glanced in the direction that his friends were pursuing Lasso Jack. They were now miles away. For a moment he stood apparently undecided; then advanced a short distance down the stream, and stopping, uttered a low, plaintive call.

Forth from a thicket still further down the creek, a fine, spirited mustang galloped toward its red master.

The Comanche took it by the bits when it came up and led it along to the fallen Apache. Procuring the dead warrior's weapons, he attached them to his saddle and moved on toward the body of the fallen pale-face to procure his weapons and scalp.

What was his surprise on reaching the spot where the white man had fallen, to find it was gone!

He glanced at the ground. A pool of dark blood marked the spot where the mustanger had lain. He raised his eyes and swept the surrounding thickets. He started with involuntary fear and horror. He saw a rifle thrust through a clump of weeds. The muzzle was pointing toward his breast, and along the dark barrel he caught the gleam of Henry St. Elmo's eye!

CHAPTER IV.

ON OVER THE PRAIRIE.

On over the prairie sped Lasso Jack with the riderless horse of St. Elmo following close behind, while in hot pursuit of him came the wild, fierce Comanche warriors.

It was plainly perceptible that the animals of both pursuers and pursued were failing; yet, if any advantage had been gained, it was with the mustanger.

Turning in his saddle, Jack saw one of the savage pursuers shoot on ahead of his companions at a speed that threatened danger.

"That won't do, my lovely red-skin," mused Jack; "I admire the fine speed of your horse, but it will be the death of you."

Unslinging his rifle from his shoulder, he raised the weapon, and, glancing along the barrel as he steadied himself in his stirrups, fired.

True to his aim, the bullet pierced the redskin's breast, and throwing up his arms, he clutched at space; then reeling to and fro, lost his balance and rolled to the earth, while his horse galloped wildly away.

"That will be a caution to the rest of the rascals to keep back," exclaimed Jack.

The pursuit still continued, but, at length a joyous sight suddenly burst upon the fugitive's eyes. It was a small belt of timber bordering a little stream that wound its way across the plain with the sinuosity of a serpent, to be swallowed up in the waters of the San Saba river.

There, in that river, the fugitive had hopes of eluding his pursuers, or of meeting with friends; for along this stream lay a route—a slight deviation from the overland—often taken by parties of emigrants and prairie merchants. Here in

the timber they often halted, for days at a time, to avail themselves of the advantages it offered to rest themselves and animals before plunging into the great treeless, shrubless prairie stretching away to El Llano Estacado.

As Jack pressed on, a cry of joy escaped his lips; a thin column of white smoke was floating up from among the trees!

Some one was in the timber, but, was it friend or foe? There was no time for conjecture or deliberation; so he headed directly for the timber.

CHAPTER V.

A MESSENGER WITH BAD TIDINGS.

The little party of traders and recruits, under Captain Louis Gray, had not long to wait in ignorance of who the approaching horsemen were, for Lasso Jack, the young mustanger, closely followed by St. Elmo's horse, dashed through the woods into their camp.

"By crackies!" exclaimed old Dan Dorne, the guide, "it's that young dare-devil, Lasso Jack! Ho, ho, Jack, how're ye, ole friend? What the furries brings you here in such a whirlwind splutter?"

"A pack of Comanche devils, my dear old Dorne," replied Jack, as he drew rein before the astonished party; "for twenty miles have I been pursued by the red varlets, and even now they are close behind me."

"Yes, they are coming!" shouted Captain Gray; "make ready to receive them, men."

But, the cunning red-skins, apprised by the smoke of the presence of some one in the grove, were too cautious to venture into unknown dangers, and so drew rein on the edge of the prairie about five hundred yards away.

Seeing that they were threatened by no immediate attack, Captain Gray turned to Lasso Jack and asked:

"Stranger, are those the only savages in this vicinity?"

"To the best of my knowledge they are, and they have come over twenty miles in pursuit of me since noon."

"How does it come you've got an extra with ye, Jack? Been snakin' in a Comanche and cabinin' his nag?" demanded the old guide.

"No, Dan; it is the horse of a young friend of mine who I am afraid has fallen a victim to the Comanches."

"Then you do not know whether the savages got your friend or not?" asked the captain.

"I did not see them get him, yet I feel almost positive they did. We had been riding for several miles together; I was slightly in advance, and at last, when I happened to gaze back I discovered for the first time that St. Elmo was gone."

"St. Elmo!" cried Captain Gray; "did you say your friend's name was St. Elmo?"

"Yes; Henry St. Elmo. And I presume you are the very party we were coming to meet here on Clear Creek," replied Lasso Jack.

"This is Captain Louis Gray's party," said one of the traders.

"Then you are the party, but I am sorry to have to bring you the tidings of Henry's mysterious disappearance."

Mabel heard all; then, as a low shriek burst from her lips, she sunk unconscious to the earth.

"My God, it has killed her!" cried Louis Gray, springing forward and lifting the inanimate form of his niece in his strong arms. He carried her at once to her tent, where he and Rosalind applied such restoratives as they could command.

"I did not think of that," said Lasso Jack, "or I would not have broken the news so suddenly. But, then, it tells me that she is Henry's sweetheart of whom I have heard the poor fellow speak so endearingly. But, friends, would it not be advisable to watch those Comanches a little? They might cause us some trouble when they find out our strength, for they are three-score strong."

"Yes, they'd better be watched," said Old Dan, "fur I'll warrant they're thirstin' fur skuls. If it wer'n't fur 'em two little critters—" and the rude old fellow pointed toward the maidens' tent—"us fellers could rough it through and run if we got into clus quarters; but, I hope that's not a man in this party but 'd die for them gals."

"Not one," replied Sir. George Richardson, and his words were repeated by every mouth present.

Dan Dorne was now sent out to watch the movements of the savages. In the mean time, Lasso Jack unsaddled his almost exhausted animal and lariated it and that of St. Elmo out to grass.

Dan Dorne soon returned and reported the Comanches in full retreat over the prairie; but

he was too well read in Indian cunning not to know that this movement was only intended to deceive them.

"They'll be back again, friends," he said, "and it will stand us in hand to keep our eyes peeled! They'll be along after dark, I reckon."

Old Dan and Jack proceeded to make arrangements for the protection of the camp during the night, and when darkness fell the old guide and the young mustanger took their positions as guards, assisted by one or two of the traders and the invincible Sir George, who, with his cane in hand, paced warily to and fro upon his beat.

The night was unusually dark, there being no moon until late, while the shadows of the towering cottonwoods made it doubly dark around the silent camp.

The hours wore away in quietude. It was nearing the hour of midnight when the crack of a rifle close by suddenly aroused the sleepers.

The traders and recruits hurried from their wagons and tents. They could not see their hand before them, but heard a slight noise outside of the circle of wagons—a noise in which there could be distinguished a heavy respiration, dull, sudden blows, and a thumping upon the earth like two foes engaged in a silent hand-to-hand death-struggle.

CHAPTER VI.

A SILENT CONFLICT.

"I TELL you, boys," exclaimed Captain Gray, "it is one of our guards in a conflict with a skulking Indian."

The captain ran to his wagon, and procuring a lantern hurried to where the combatants were engaged, to discover Old Dan and a half-nude savage in a terrible struggle. But, no sooner did the rays of the captain's lantern stream across them, than the savage attempted to free himself and escape. The old guide's grasp could not be broken, and he soon ended the conflict by driving his knife into the Comanche's breast.

Then as the red foe sunk backward to the earth lifeless, Old Dan sprung to his feet.

"By crackey!" he exclaimed, "that war a all-fired tuff tussel, boys. The greasy varlet war wiry as a snake, and strong as a b'ar."

"Why didn't you call for 'elp, Dan?" asked Sir George, who by this time had joined the party.

"Call fur 'elp?" repeated Old Dan, disdainfully; "why, my lord, do you suppose that ole Dan Dorne would call for 'elp when he's got but one foe to deal with? No sir-ee, ole England! But then I thought once I would have to call fur help, fur I see'd two o' the red niggers skulkin' 'bout the wagons."

"Then we are in no little danger," said Captain Gray.

"Yes, no doubt of it, cap'n," replied Dorne; "these imps are scouts sent out to find out our situation, and if that o'ther darned scamp got away with all the information he wanted, like as any way we'll have a little dig with the ropin' hounds, yet."

"Then let not a man's eye be closed in sleep again to-night," commanded Captain Gray.

"That's the music, cap'n," exclaimed Old Dan; "and now I'll go out and git Lasso Jack and go to scoutin' about to find whar the red sinners are."

The old guide at once took his departure for the woods, while those at camp posted themselves in position, ready for instant battle.

But the night wore away without any further demonstration on the part of the Comanches. By daylight, all was life and bustle in the camp. Breakfast was prepared and eaten, and arrangements made for immediate departure, for the two scouts, the young mustanger and the old guide, had reported the country entirely deserted by the enemy.

Lasso Jack was to accompany the party, at which all were highly pleased, and shortly after sunrise the train was in motion, Lasso Jack on the lead, while Old Dan and Sir George brought up the rear.

The light vehicle with the two girls was near the middle of the train. Mabel was sad at heart and sorrowing for her lost lover, while little Rosalind sat day-dreaming and shyly watching the commanding form of the handsome young cavalier in advance of the train.

Noon found them several miles from Clear Creek. They halted a few minutes for dinner, and to rest and feed their animals, then resumed their journey.

There is something grand, majestic and awe-inspiring in a great prairie on a calm day. It is plainly suggestive of the boundless ocean when no breeze ruffles its surface; and as Lasso Jack rode on at the head of the train with the sweet,

fair face of Rosalind Garfield foremost of all others in his mind, he thought he had never seen a prairie that looked so lovely, so romantic, so grand as the one spread out before him and stretching away into the hazy distance, like the vision of a dream. He could not help feasting his eyes upon its solemn grandeur, and watching the birds skimming along its surface of green, or the frightened deer floating away into the mist of the distant horizon.

While thus engaged in passing the moments as he rode on, the romance of the prairie was suddenly overshadowed by seeing a large body of horsemen galloping to the westward of them.

They were plainly outlined against the crimson sky—for the sun was near its setting—and he could see the flashing of gun-barrels or spear-heads, and the nodding of plumes about the riders' heads.

Turning about he made known his discovery to his friends, and advised an immediate halt. There was not a doubt in his mind but that the inhuman vultures were swooping down upon the train!

The wagons were driven to one side of the road about two hundred yards to the summit of a little knoll; the horses were unhitched and the wagons drawn in a circle by hand. Inside of this small inclosure the animals were hitched, and the men took their position within this feeble defense.

They soon discovered that the savages were coming directly toward them, at a furious speed. They were not over half a mile away, and it was feared that they intended to attempt the capture of the train by a sudden attack with all their force.

The savages were a hundred strong, and as they approached the train, the hideousness of their yells, mingled with the tramp of their animals' hoofs, drove a chill of terror to the hearts of the little band, for in those demoniac yells they read a fearful doom!

CHAPTER VII.

A SCENE OF CARNAGE.

As the morning sun arose over that Texan prairie, it shone upon a scene of death and carnage.

After the night had passed, with its repeated assaults by the Comanches, it left but few of Captain Gray's party alive to see the morning sun rise. Captain Gray himself, every one of his recruits, and all but three of the traders lay dead. They had fallen during the night, defending their camp.

The foe had been repulsed more than a dozen times and had paid dearly for their rash attacks, as more than a score of bloody corpses outside of the circle of wagons testified.

Still the survivors of that night's massacre were masters of the situation. These were Lasso Jack, Dan Dorne, Sir George Richardson, three of the traders, and the two maidens, Rosalind and Mabel Garfield. But the men presented the picture of despair. Their faces were blackened and begrimed with powder and dust. They were almost exhausted with the night's conflict, and when day dawned, it brought but little relief to their excited minds. The sight of their dead comrades lying around them, with their ghastly faces staring heavenward—the agonizing cries of the dying, to whom they could render no assistance—the piteous screams of the wounded and terrified horses that stood pawing and moaning, here and there—all these contributed new terrors to their situation, that darkness had kept concealed.

Lasso Jack was really the only man that seemed possessed of a spark of hope. He could not, for a moment, entertain the thought of giving up the battle while those two fair, helpless girls were still alive, for they now looked to him for protection. In his last, dying moments, their uncle had intrusted them to the care of the young mustanger, who accepted the trust, promising to maintain it till the last.

At the beginning of the contest, the maidens had been placed in one of the heavy wagons which was rendered bullet-proof by piling some of the contents of the traders' wagons around it. In this cover had they remained all of that terrible night. Jack had broken to them the sad news of their uncle's death. It was a terrible shock, but they had prepared themselves for the worst, and accepted the cruel blows of fate with quiet but anguish hearts. Upon Lasso Jack they now looked as their all, and whenever he came to their wagon, with words of cheer and hope, he was received with gentle words, and trusting countenances beaming with hope and love.

Old Dan Dorne and Sir George were blackened and begrimed with powder and dust, yet, with

rifle in hand, they were ever at their posts, evincing a spirit of determination and courage that only death itself could overcome.

Only the three surviving traders showed a spirit of hopelessness and despair. Daylight had revealed to them their terrible situation—their dead comrades, the destruction of the promised hopes that awaited their arrival at Santa Fe—in fact, a certain death to all.

But half a dozen horses of all remained within the inclosure of wagons an hour after sunrise. Those wounded were unhitched and turned loose upon the prairie, to seek relief from their pain in the unrestrained freedom of the plain. Among those retained and uninjured were Lasso Jack's mustang and Captain Gray's favorite charger. Both were of more than common speed, and a knowledge of the fact suggested to Lasso Jack, more than once during the night, the possibility of riding through the lines of the enemy that surrounded them on all sides. By so doing, assistance might be procured and the besieged relieved. Yet it would require hours of hard riding to reach a point where aid could be had, and the absence of one man from the little party might turn the tide of victory—nearly won already, in favor of the savages. And then, if any one left at all, it would have to be Lasso Jack, for none of the others possessed that knowledge of the country which haste required.

But Jack could not leave those two fair girls intrusted to his care. The loving eyes and gentle words of Rosalind had aroused in his breast a spirit that seemed to endow him with the strength of a host. Love had, even at that hour of peril, fired the heart of the young mustanger, and nothing but the hand of death could tear him from the object of that love.

But what was to be done—what could they do? It would be impossible to withstand the attacks of the enemy much longer. The supply of water procured before starting across the prairie, was nearly exhausted, and upon that hot, dry plain, without a shrub to intercept the broiling rays of the sun, they could not exist without the life-giving fluid.

The savages, now numbering about four-score, were scattered around the camp in a circle about a quarter of a mile away. They seemed entirely ignorant of the damage they had inflicted upon the whites, which would have rendered it comparatively easy to capture the whole train, had they made a determined assault. They appeared to be waiting for some demonstration on the part of the whites, but as the hours wore on and no movement was made, the red foes were seen to mount their animals.

"They're mountin' for another charge, boys," said Old Dan.

"Yes," said Lasso Jack, "but let us be ready for them. Let us see that every rifle in the camp is loaded and primed, and then, when we fire, be calm and deliberate and make every shot count. Ah! the demons are coming!"

True enough. With whoop and yell the Comanches were coming down toward the beleaguered camp; but with Spartan bravery, the little band prepared to meet them.

Kneeling down, each man took aim under the barricade of wagons. As soon as the foe had come within range, all fired, then threw aside their weapons and seized others. In this manner they kept up an incessant and deadly fire upon the foe, who, believing the force of the whites was four times that which it really was, turned about and retreated hastily beyond rifle-range. But, before they turned, they discharged a volley of random shots, and one of the remaining three traders was killed.

The little band were now reduced to five, and it seemed as though they would never be able to repel another charge. Still they all determined to die fighting, rather than surrender, for they were satisfied they would be tortured to death if taken alive.

"This, friends," said Sir George, "is getting to be a serious matter. It is a bit the most terrible adventure I've ever had, and were hit not for those fair girls there, I could die hand were scalped with something of an heavy conscience. But, hour fates all seem 'opeless. I would take notes for my book of hadventure did I think I would 'ave a scalp on a warm 'ead when hanother sun rises."

There was no ostentation in the Englishman's talk. He was serious about his remarks. He was brave and fearless, and his words did not belie his spirit of courage. He admired the cool bravery and superior judgment of Lasso Jack; and, although he envied him the smiles Rosalind bestowed upon him, he accepted the situation with manly grace and heroic submission.

Lasso Jack was satisfied that the Indians

would make another attack soon, and he could see no avenue of escape from a relentless massacre, unless it was effected through stratagem. But, even this seemed impossible. How could they mislead the foe there in plain sight upon the open prairie, with four score of basilisk eyes watching them?

All relapsed into a hopeless silence. Lasso Jack became thoughtful and silent. He stood gazing reflectively upon the ground, and toying with a nervous impatience with the hilt of his knife. At last a grim smile lit up his bronzed, boyish face as he glanced toward the wagon under which the body of Captain Gray lay wrapped in a blanket; then turning to his companions, he said:

"Boys, I believe I have it—the plan by which we can escape. It may fail, but if so, there will be no great loss nor risk. But I must have the consent of the maidens before I undertake to carry it out. So I will see them at once."

He turned and walked to the wagons wherein the maidens sat. In a few minutes he returned, and said:

"It is all right, friends; one of you saddle and bridle Captain Gray's horse, and I will proceed to put my scheme into execution."

One of the traders turned away to comply with his request, wondering, as did all the rest, what the young mustanger's intentions were.

CHAPTER VIII.

"TEXAN TERROR" AND HIS MINIONS.

OUT upon the summit of a little swell in the prairie, about five hundred yards from the beleagued party of Captain Gray—now, alas, no more!—a party of savages were gathered, watching with fiendish triumph the little circle of covered wagons. I said they were all savages. This is true so far as humanity is concerned, but there were white renegades, half-breeds and Mexicans in the party. One tall, dark-brown fellow, whose plumed hat and gold-embroidered serape told that he was leader of the band, stood gazing with grim, moody and sullen brow toward the feeble barricade of the whites.

"What think you, Don Diaz—can the whites hold out much longer?" a white renegade finally asked of Texan Terror, for as such was the prairie pirate, Don Juarez Diaz, known.

"I can't see how they have held out as long as they have," the villain replied; "but I would like to know what has become of the two spies sent into their camp the night they were encamped on Clear Creek."

"Probably they got their hair lifted," replied a renegade.

"It may be possible," returned Texan Terror, "but I hardly think they would permit themselves to be caught. If I was sure they had ensconced themselves in the traders' wagons, among their bales and boxes, as they were intending to do, I could rest easy, and await the signal they were to give, but I declare I can't wait much longer for their movements."

"If Lasso Jack is still in their party, it will be a hard matter for us to get into their camp."

"It has been proven already," said Texan Terror, "that they are fighters over there, but we must capture that train, no matter what it costs. It is worth considerable money, yet the literal value of the train would be nothing to me, to what the life of Captain Louis Gray would be."

"Are you sure he is in the party, senor?"

"Without a doubt, and if I can once get my hands on him I will make his life pay for those of my men that were hung by the sailors under his command, a year ago on the Maracopa. But I am satisfied our attacks of last night thinned out the enemy's ranks some, and unless they have a supply of water with them, they will soon have to succumb, or famish. Then I know from the wounded horses they have turned loose, that they suffered some loss."

"If Sly Wolf and Brave Heart are in their camp, hidden in their wagons, and succeed in firing their wagons at the proper time, we may get them with but little more trouble."

"Yes," returned Diaz; "if I did not think they would do something soon, I would press the whites from all sides. I am satisfied we could carry their defenses easy enough by storm, but it would entail the loss of many of my command upon me; and perhaps, in the conflict, those pretty nieces of Captain Gray would get killed, and that would be the heaviest blow of all, for they are to be my portion of the plundered train."

"We've got to capture it before we plunder it, captain," said a half-breed; "but, look yonder, senor, I see smoke rising from the wagons

now. Brave Heart and Sly Wolf must be at work. *Caramba!* See! see!"

The party gazed away toward the circle of wagons. They saw a dense column of smoke rising from the camp of the whites. Something had been set on fire, and the Mexicans and savages believed it was the beginning of the long-expected movement of their spies, who, they had not a doubt, were ensconced within the wagons.

Texan Terror raised his field-glass to his eyes and surveyed the besieged camp, but the intervening wagons prevented him from seeing what was on fire, and what was going on.

"I can't tell what is on fire in their camp, but let my braves and lancers be ready for any emergencies," he said, "for I believe the crisis is coming."

The prairie freebooters stood prepared to mount. Texan Terror gave the signal to keep on the alert to his Comanche allies, grouped in a circle over the plain.

Several minutes had passed, when suddenly a horseman shot from the circle of wagons, and swept like an arrow over the plain.

The pirate chieftain again lifted his glass to his eyes, and brought it to bear on the flying horseman.

"*Caramba!*" he exclaimed, excitedly, "it is Captain Gray. I can recognize his long, flowing white beard and hair. He is trying to escape through our lines, no doubt to procure assistance and relieve his train. Mount, men, and away in pursuit. Ride as though the devil was after you—run him down—catch the white-haired villain and a fine reward will be yours!"

The next minute the whole party had leaped upon their animals and were sweeping away like the wind over the prairie in pursuit of the flying horseman, Texan Terror taking the lead and shouting at the top of his iron lungs.

The Comanches stationed in small parties at various points around the wagons, saw what was going on, and they, too, mounted and shot away in pursuit.

The fugitive was headed directly northward, and his white charger seemed like a snow-white bird skimming along the surface of the dark-green prairie. But at times the rider seemed to have no control over the beast, or was in doubt as to his course, and would swerve to the right or the left, thereby giving the pursuers much advantage, and at times bringing them within gunshot of him.

Still he swept on—on! And still the inhuman Texan Terror led on the chase. He was satisfied the fugitive was Captain Louis Gray, and he knew if he eluded them he would soon return with aid and raise the siege, for he was headed directly toward Fort —.

For more than an hour the race continued, but it was noticed by the lynx-eyed pursuers that the fugitive's horse was unused to such long heats—that he was fast failing. He could hold out but little longer. Victory would soon reward the pursuers' efforts.

The race continues. The fugitive seems to have hope. He sits erect in his saddle. No fear possesses him; he never turns his head.

Texan Terror is now ahead of his companions several rods. He is almost up with Captain Gray. He will soon overtake him.

True enough, a few minutes more and the Mexican freebooter dashes alongside of the fugitive! He puts out his hand and seizes the reins of the captain's foaming steed, and then, as he brings both horses to a stop, he levels a pistol at the captain's breast, and demands his surrender.

But the captain never flinches—never speaks. He stares on in advance of him with stony eyes, and ghastly, haggard features.

Texan Terror feels a strange terror creeping over him, for he sees that he has been pursuing a dead man!

He sees that Captain Louis Gray is dead—stone dead, and that he has been tied and propped up on his animal's back.

The followers of Diaz soon came up, and learned their great mistake with a cry of disappointment.

"We have been deceived, my friends," Diaz said.

"Yes, yes," replied one of his men; "Lasso Jack has again outwitted Juarez Diaz, the great Texan Terror."

The brow of the pirate chieftain knitted with suppressed rage and resentment, and his black eyes flashed with vengeful light; but he did not speak, for he knew his man had told what to him was a bitter truth.

"Yes," responded a Comanche chief, "they have beaten us. They have turned a swift

horse loose upon the prairie with a dead man upon it. They have carried their point. They have drawn us away. When we return we will find the rest of the train has escaped us."

"Then let us retrace our steps at once," said Diaz. "We may be in time to catch them yet. We should not all of us have left."

"One party of Comanches returned to watch the whites," said a half-breed, "after they had ridden a few miles."

"Then we may get them yet," cried Diaz. "Come, spur up, men; ride, ride!"

They began retracing their steps, but their animals were nearly exhausted, and it required long hours to regain the point where the race began.

But a shout of triumph and joy pealed from their lips when they saw the wagon-train standing just as they had left it. But they soon discovered that there was not a sign of life about it. They thought, however, this absence of life was another trick of the pale-faces, and so they kept their distance from the wagons, until they had become fully satisfied that the pale-face camp was deserted!

With defeated hopes they approached the train. They reached the wagons, and dismounting, entered the inclosure of vehicles.

There a fearful sight met their gaze. For a moment they stood and looked about them, with an expression of silent horror. Dead men, black and bloated lay around them, and here and there the contents of the traders' wagons were strewn in one promiscuous mass.

At one side of the inclosure was a deep hole, that had been recently dug, probably a grave for the dead; but no difference what it had been intended for, it had been abandoned.

Here and there were heaps of ashes where boxes of goods taken from the traders' wagons had been burned, no doubt to prevent their falling into the enemies' hands. However, there were three or four wagons that yet contained part of their loads. This was mostly small kegs of rum and brandy. Texan Terror knew at once why these were left undisturbed, to fall into the Comanches' hands. It was to make drunk the enemy, and give the whites time to make good their escape, ere they could sober off.

No sooner was the liquor discovered than the Comanches, the Mexicans, and renegade freebooters made a dash for it. The kegs were rolled out into the inclosure, the heads stove in with tomahawks, and the fiery contents poured down their throats like water. Diaz tried to induce them to drink moderately, but he might as well have tried to stay a hurricane.

Some of them were so drunk they could not walk, and in less than half an hour, Texan Terror was the only sober man in the party, and even he was intoxicated with rage and anger, and proceeded to empty every drop—except a private flask full, which he put in his own pocket—or the liquor out on the ground.

For hours the pirate chief walked to and fro among the prostrate forms of the drunken men, cursing and raving like a madman, occasionally emphasizing an oath by giving a savage a furious kick, with his heavy-booted foot. And it was no mystery to him that two or three of the band, against whom he held an old grudge, never recovered from their debauch.

It was hours before the drunken pack had slept off the effects of the liquor, and were enabled to walk straight again. When they did, Diaz put them to work, but by this time it was nearly sunset.

The pirate chief had his minions harness their ponies to the wagons of the emigrants, while the Comanches gathered together all the boxes, kegs and things strewn about and placed them in the wagons. The bodies of the dead, those that Diaz had assassinated while they lay drunk, and those of the white traders and recruits, were also placed in a vehicle for removal to some other point.

The pirate had an object in thus clearing the place of every trace of the late bloody conflict. He had learned that another train of great value was coming in a few days, and by removing all traces of Captain Gray's disaster, they might suspect no danger, and thereby fall an easy prey to the freebooters and Comanches.

Texan Terror felt satisfied that those of his band who had dropped from the chase of the lifeless Captain Gray, had returned and were in pursuit of the fugitives, who, judging from the number of their dead, could be but few. Of course, he knew the fugitives had taken Captain Gray's nieces with them, and thus incumbered, the villain had great hopes of the capture of the entire escort and their charge.

In placing the slain whites in the wagon for removal, they were not a little startled to find

among them the body of a dead Indian, whom they at once recognized as one of their spies, Sly Wolf. How he had been slain they knew not.

When all was in readiness, the Mexicans drove the wagons forward, keeping away from the road, and striking across the plain. They pushed on for several miles due west, then turned northward until they came to a little grove of cottonwoods, in which they came to a halt.

To still favor their inhuman work, a heavy shower, that lasted several minutes, fell shortly after dark, thereby assisting much in obliterating their trail.

CHAPTER IX.

WHERE WAS ST. ELMO?

LET US now go back and look after the young mustanger, Henry St. Elmo, whom we left lying apparently lifeless on the bank of the creek.

The bullet of both the Comanche and Apache warriors had grazed his breast, inflicting a couple of painful flesh wounds. The two balls struck him at the same instant, with such stunning force, that he was stricken breathless and unconscious to the earth. Here in this state he lay during the conflict between the Comanche and Apache antagonists, and when the former had gained the victory, and possessed himself of his foe's scalp, and started for his horse, our young friend heard his retreating footsteps, and thought his moment to act had come, so springing to his feet, he took up his rifle and glided into a dense clump of bushes and vines. From this covert he watched the savage's movements, for he had resolved that that horse should bear him to safety.

Soon the Comanche returned, and having picked up the Apache's arms, the red-skin came up to secure the scalp of the white.

It was his last scalp-hunt, however, for the Comanche caught the gleam of the supposed dead man's eye along his rifle-barrel, and before he could move a single muscle, the rifle cracked, and a bullet pierced his breast.

With scarcely a cry, the warrior fell dead, while the young mustanger sprung from his covert and secured the animal.

The youth felt now, that he was, for the time being, safe. This mental ease and security toned down the excitement that had heretofore deadened the pain of his wound, and he experienced a sharp, stinging sensation through his breast.

So he hitched the mustang, and going down to the creek, he removed his hunting-shirt, and washed the blood and dust from his wounds. This done, he dressed the wounds as well as his means would permit, and experienced great relief from the pain and burning fever.

When his wounds were attended to, he possessed himself of such of the Indian's weapons as would likely prove of use to him, then mounted the mustang and rode away in a south-westerly direction.

And now, when he had fully realized that he was safe once more from savage foes, his mind became occupied with thoughts that were almost agonizing. However, he felt easy so far as his friend, Lasso Jack, was concerned. He knew that the savages were not likely to get him unless accident befell him; but what gave him most anxiety was the disappointment in meeting the idol of his heart, Mabel Garfield, whom he had promised to welcome at a specified point and accompany to Sante Fe. The more he reflected on the matter, the more harrowing his feelings became; but at last he found consolation in the hope that Lasso Jack might have escaped and hastened to join Captain Gray's party, and put them on their guard against the new dangers that had sprung up so suddenly along the emigrant trail.

But what news would Jack give Mabel of his fate? As Jack knew nothing of his fate, and doubtless would suppose him dead, and so report to Mabel, he knew the train would not wait for him, but would continue on its way. By pursuing his present course, he hoped to strike the trail in advance of the train, and then wait till it came up.

The Indian's pony was a mettlesome one, and so he was enabled to journey on rapidly, in the course which he thought would enable him to strike the wagon-trail at about the right point to bring him in advance of the train, considering it was at Clear Creek that day, as he had received information that it would be.

He rode on, however, and the day advanced, and at last the sun went down in a sea of fire.

From the setting sun Henry took his bearings for the night, and still rode sharply on. Darkness soon fell, but the pain of his wounds and the tumult of thoughts that were crowding his

excited, feverish brain, threw him into a kind of oblivious reflection, from which he finally awoke to find he had lost his course, and was wandering at random over the great trackless prairie.

He sincerely regretted this blunder, and censured himself for committing it. His only course now was to wait till the moon came up, and take his direction anew from it.

There was a lariat and picket-pin attached to the trappings of the pony; so, dismounting, he staked the animal to grass, and then wrapping a blanket around himself, lay down upon the ground to wait and rest. He endeavored to keep awake, but, weak from loss of blood, exertion, and mental exhaustion, he fell into a sound slumber and slept for hours.

The moon did not rise until nearly midnight, but when he awoke he found it was high in the heavens; and he had become so confused and bewildered, so turned round, that he could not tell whether the moon was on the east or west side of the midnight meridian. So he was compelled to wait still longer, and when at last he got the points of the compass, he resumed his journey.

Riding on till daylight, he found that he was growing weak with hunger, but he had no trouble in finding a curlew, which he succeeded in killing. Then he struck a fire by means of a match and some dry sticks that he found by a little stream. Dressing the bird, he soon roasted it, and made a sumptuous meal thereon, having some left for future need.

Feeling greatly refreshed, he resumed his journey. He rode on and on all day, without reaching the wagon-route along which Captain Gray and his party were expected to pass. This convinced him he was lost again upon that trackless waste of prairie, and when darkness again set in, he tied his pony out to grass, and threw himself upon the ground with a feeling akin to despair. He had found, by this time, that a year upon the prairies of Texas had done little toward familiarizing him with the topography of that trackless country.

The night was passed in restlessness and troubled dreams, and on the following morning he again resumed his journey in a new course. All day he traveled over the boundless ocean of verdure without seeing a sign of life, unless it was a skulking coyote or solitary raven, and these always had a tendency to impress a lone hunter or traveler with an air of desolation.

Night again set in, but Henry resolved to keep moving. He saw that his success in striking the trail now depended entirely upon fate.

The night wore slowly on. The moon finally came up and threw a bright, mellow light over the plain, that was dream-like in its inspiration.

Still Henry St. Elmo rode on.

But hark! A sound suddenly breaks upon his ears—a sound that seems to come from spiritland.

His animal stopped, pricked up its ears and snuffed the air with affright.

Henry bent his head and listened. He started. He heard a cry—a human cry—as if imploring help, and yet coming from out the realms of Nowhere.

He gazed around him and above him, but he could see nothing but the starry sky and the murky plain. Might he not be mistaken? He listened again. Again he heard that cry. Whence did it come? It was a strange cry, and at times it was low and sepulchral, and seemed to issue from the bowels of the earth.

He rode on a few paces, then turned and rode round and round in a circle; still he could find nothing. He was satisfied the voice did not emanate from beyond the circle he had described. But there was something a little mysterious about it, for the ground was smooth as a lawn, and the grass upon it so short that a bird or squirrel could not have hid within it.

Again that cry or call!

It was nearer him than before, and still seemed to come from far down in the earth.

The young mustanger felt a curious sensation creep over him, and as he sat upon his pony gazing around him like one bewildered, a sudden and involuntary cry burst from his lips, as he caught sight of an object, plainly revealed by the broad glare of the moon.

A few paces to the right of him, in the short grass, was a small, circular spot, covered with what seemed to be the ashes of a camp-fire, and from the center of that spot a human hand and arm were thrust upward through the earth!

It was a small hand, white as snow, and upon one of the fingers something flashed like a tiny speck of fire.

What did it mean? A human hand, white as

marble—a woman's hand and arm, without a doubt—thrust upward from the earth, there in the midnight solitude of that wild Texan prairie?

CHAPTER X.

A QUEER BURIAL.

THE reader has doubtless inferred, to a certain extent, what the plans of the young mustanger, Lasso Jack, were that he had conceived for outwitting and escaping from the horde of savages and prairie freebooters that hung around them upon the plain like groups of hungry vultures.

The first to be done was to bind the body of Captain Gray upon his wild, spirited horse and turn it loose upon the prairie, feeling confident that the savages would pursue him, and thus create a diversion in their favor. It was an unchristian use to make of the dead, but it was a dire necessity to the living; it was the only avenue to escape from an indiscriminate massacre—to save the lives of the two fair, helpless girls from a torturing captivity.

But, even Lasso Jack would have refrained from using the remains of the captain for such a purpose, had he not received the consent of the agonized sisters in the matter, as also, their acquiescence in all his plans for their rescue.

After his interview with the maidens, Jack returned to his friends and made known to them his plans.

Every man then went to work. In the first place a number of boxes belonging to the traders' wagons were emptied of their contents and burned in two or three different places within the inclosure. Then a spade—used by the traders for trenching their tents—was produced and one of the men set to work removing the sod from over a space about four feet square. This would require great pains and mechanical precision, for the sod was to be replaced so as to conceal every trace of its having been disturbed. When the sod was lifted the trader began digging downward, throwing the dirt away about fifteen feet from the hole.

Lasso Jack, Dan Dorne, and the other trader were busily engaged, in the meantime, preparing to send the captain's body away over the plain upon his spirited horse as soon as other arrangements were completed. It was a sad, sad duty to perform, but the only resource to save the lives of Mabel and Rosalind.

Sir George Richardson having been sent into one of the traders' wagons to empty a large box, entered at the front end of the wagon, and in order to reach the box in question he would be compelled to remove several smaller ones that intervened. This he at once proceeded to do, lifting the boxes and throwing them out. Some of them, containing costly fabrics, were covered with a heavy blanket to insure the entrance of no dust or water into the boxes.

This blanket Sir George seized hold of to remove, but the very instant that his hand came in contact with it, an involuntary cry burst from his lips, and he withdrew his hand as quick as though the blanket had been a red-hot sheet of fire, *for beneath it, he felt some living thing move!*

For a moment the Englishman hesitated. He believed that a huge serpent had got into the wagon some way or other, and had ensconced it self under the blanket.

But, no time was to be lost in idle speculation. Every moment was precious now, for an impending fate was hanging over the heads of the little party. So he turned around and taking up his gold-headed cane, that he had placed in the front end of the wagon on entering, he grasped it in the middle with the left hand. Then he gave it a quick wrench, and the gold knob parted from the wood and was followed by a long, glittering dagger that appeared from the hollow staff.

Raising the polished weapon in an attitude of defense, he took hold of the blanket again, and quickly drew it aside.

He started with blank surprise, and for a moment his face seemed to wear an expression of terror, for, there before him, he beheld a Comanche Indian lying curled up among the boxes like a young cub bear!

No sooner, however, did the cunning savage see that he had been discovered than he sprung to his feet and attempted to escape from the wagon, knowing that resistance would be useless. As he sprang apast Sir George, he endeavored to bury a hatchet in his brain, but the Englishman dodged the blow and at the same time drove the blade of his dagger to the guards in the savage's breast.

With a wild, unearthly scream the doomed wretch leaped from the wagon, ran a few paces and fell dead.

His screams created a momentary excitement among Sir George's friends, but he soon explained the whole matter, adding—as he returned his dagger to the hollow staff of his cane:

"That counts the first red-skin for me. *Hi!* It is decidedly wondrous what amount of serpent-like cunning these red-men have in America possess, *decidedly* wondrous."

So saying, he resumed his work of removing the boxes, while his friends returned to theirs. He soon reached the large box, which he at once broke open and emptied of its contents.

When this was accomplished, he rolled the box from the wagon, and with the assistance of one of his friends, carried it to where the trader was making the excavation in the ground.

The box was then measured and the hole dug of sufficient length, depth and breadth to receive it.

It required but a few minutes to fit the box in the ground, the top about six inches below the surface of the ground. This done, the Englishman covered the bottom, and lined the sides of the box with some of the traders' cloths.

The horse with the lifeless body of Captain Gray upon it, was now led around a wagon where it could not be seen by the maidens, who were now taken from their wagon and conducted to the buried box.

"There, girls," said Lasso Jack, pointing to the neatly furnished box, "is your only resort for escape. In that box we hope to cover you so that you will escape the savages until I can bring assistance to your release."

"I hope," said Mabel, sorrowfully, "it will not prove a living tomb."

"I am sure it would be preferable to Indian captivity," said Rosalind.

"No, no, Miss Garfield," said Jack; "you need have no fears. We will arrange it so you will experience no inconvenience for want of fresh air. We will supply you with water and food to last you until I come back, which may be to-night; if not, by to-morrow noon at furthest."

"But, suppose you should never return—not one of you?" said Rosalind, sadly.

"When sufficient time for our return has elapsed and none of us appear, then you can make your own escape from the box. We will cover it so that you can release yourselves. We will place a thin layer of sod and turf over you, and if you should be compelled to release yourselves, take the road and follow it westward. About twenty miles from here you will come upon an old Mexican ranchero, who will undoubtedly assist you. There is scarcely doubt but that I will be back within the time stipulated. If you could only stand the ride, I would take you along now, but then you could not. This box retreat, girls, is your only salvation."

"Oh, Jack!" exclaimed Rosalind, "you have been more than a friend to us, and if ever we escape, we will forever owe you a debt of gratitude."

"No, no, Rosalind, you need never feel under obligations to me. It is a duty that I owe to my fellow-beings to aid them in time of need. But time, my dear young ladies, is precious, and we must improve it."

He took Rosalind by the hand, and assisted her down into the box. Then, as he was about to withdraw his hand, she raised her head and their eyes met in one last, lingering gaze, that told of the silent communion of their young hearts. Jack pressed her little, soft hand, gently, and then, as he withdrew it, he deftly slipped a gold ring upon one of her tapering fingers, saying:

"Will you accept it, and wear it?"

"For your sake, Jack," and tears that told of a new-born hope, gathered in the maiden's eyes.

Mabel was assisted to Rosalind's side. Their retreat was quite roomy, and they found they would not be cramped a great deal. They could sit or lie comfortably, but the height of the box would not admit of their standing.

Water was given them in a stone jug, with an ample supply of provision to last several days.

Now came the work of closing the top. The covering was of heavy board, and in these, several round holes were cut, and powder-horns with both ends open inserted therein, with the small ends pointing upward. These were to be ventilators to the maidens' retreat.

With sad and heavy hearts, Lasso Jack and Sir George carefully placed the covering over the box; then, with the greatest precision the sod and turf were placed upon this; great care being taken that the mouth of the powder-horns were not closed up, yet concealed from the closest observation by tangling grass over them. In digging the pit, the digger had made such calculations that the box would be let in the

ground below the surface just the thickness of the sod, so that when it was replaced there would be no irregularities on the outer surface.

When the job was completed, Jack placed his lips to the mouth of one of the horns that protruded half an inch above the surface of the ground, and asked:

"Have you plenty of air, down there girls?"

"Yes, sir," Rosalind's voice responded, "it is dark, but very comfortable. We can see specks of daylight through the horns."

"How are you going to conceal this dirt, Jack?" asked one of the traders; "the savages will know it was brought here, and will nose around till they find the hole it came out of."

"We can easily remedy that," said Jack; "dig another hole and throw the dirt upon this pile. The savages will never dream but that it came out of the same hole."

"By St. George, Jack!" exclaimed Sir George, "you've an' lead, hon you that is remarkable for *his* originality, you 'ave."

The hole was at once dug as Jack requested, then the young mustanger turned to Old Dan and said:

"Now let the horse out, Dan, and give him a keen cut with the whip, to start him away. The yells of the savages will soon rise and keep him going."

The next moment the fine, spirited steed of Captain Gray, with its grim, lifeless rider, was outside of the circle of wagons, and flying over the plain at a wild, break-neck speed.

"Now, boys, mount your horses and prepare to leave," said Lasso Jack; then he turned, and going back to where the maidens were, he dropped upon his knees, and applying his mouth to one of the horns, said:

"The plan works well, girls. The savages are pursuing the lifeless horseman, and now we shall attempt our escape. Rest easy, you shall be released soon. Good-by."

He lingered long enough to hear Rosalind's "God speed you, Jack;" then he arose, and going to where his horse was in waiting, mounted it, rode from the wagon-corral, and galloped away toward the west, closely followed by Old Dan, Sir George, and the two traders.

They saw before they started the savages were all in hot pursuit of the lifeless fugitive, and felt in hopes that they would escape unobserved, but in this they were disappointed.

They had not ridden over five miles, when they discovered they were being followed by a score of yelling Comanches.

"Boys," said Lasso Jack, "our only hope now lays in the speed of our horses, and let every one of you ride, ride for your lives!"

CHAPTER XI.

BIG BEAR LOSES HIS GAME.

It was the day following that of our friends' escape from the wagon corral on the plain.

Across the great Texan prairie, to the Northward of the scene of Captain Gray's disaster, a solitary individual was making his way on foot. Across his shoulder he carried a rifle. A brace of pistols were in his girdle, alongside of his hunting-knife.

His collar was thrown open, displaying a full, massive chest, that was wildly throbbing with the pent-up emotions of fear and anxiety. His cap was pushed back from a fine, intellectual brow, that was streaming with perspiration, for it was a hot, midsummer day.

He was a young man, apparently possessed of inexhaustible endurance, and the elasticity of an antelope. The youthful pedestrian was our hero, Lasso Jack, the young mustanger.

As before stated, it was the day following that of his escape from the wagon-corral, that we find him journeying on foot over the plain, and yet he had not been to the fort where he expected to find aid for the rescue of Rosalind and Mabel.

His horse had fallen dead under him from hard riding, but, never faltering, he pressed on, on foot.

But the brave youth was soon doomed to meet with another disappointment. He was discovered by a party of savages, and made a narrow escape from capture, by taking to a little grove, where he was compelled to remain concealed for hours, each of which seemed an age, so great was his anxiety for the rescue of the maidens that he had left buried on the plain.

At length he managed to escape, under cover of darkness, and pursue his onward course; but his detention by the savages, and loss of his horse, had thrown him several hours behind, which it would require superhuman exertions to regain.

It was past noon, and he was some ten miles from his destination, when he suddenly detected

a slight noise like the far-off roll of thunder. But he knew it was not thunder, for the sky was cloudless.

He turned and swept the horizon. He started, and an exclamation of surprise burst from his lips.

Far away upon the plain, to the southward of him, he saw a band of horsemen, galloping down toward him, a dark cloud of dust hanging over them.

They were over two miles away, yet it was easy for one accustomed to the prairies as was Lasso Jack, to see that it was a band of savages. And now arose the questions: had they discovered him? or were they pursuing some of his friends that he had left behind?

He could arrive at no definite conclusion on either question, and was at a loss to know what course to pursue. He knew flight would be useless, so he threw himself down in the tall prairie-grass, and tangled it carefully over him.

In this position, with his ear pressed closely to the ground, the young mustanger could plainly hear the clatter and feel the vibratory shock of the horses' hoofs; and now a new fear took possession of him—a fear that he would be trampled to death beneath the pounding hoofs.

But we must now leave our hero, and change the scene of our story for a short time.

Far away to the southward a band of some thirty Comanche Indians were halted in a little clump of cottonwood trees, gazing out upon the broad prairie that stretched its unbroken length away leagues to the northward.

They were all well mounted upon fine, clean-limbed and spirited mustang ponies. They were armed with rifles, tomahawks and knives, yet it was evident they were not a war-party. Their lariats, lassoes and other trappings told that they were a party of hunters in pursuit of wild horses.

As they stood in the edge of the grove and gazed away to the northward of them, it was not the prairie and its romantic beauty that attracted their attention, for they had seen it a hundred times before, but it was a herd of wild horses that were grazing upon it about a quarter of a mile away.

"Look! Do my braves see the herd of wild horses whose leader is White Lightning?" asked the leader of the party who was known as Big Bear, a name very suggestive from his short, burly appearance, in which the animal propensities were fully developed.

His companions responded in the affirmative, as, with steady eyes, they gazed upon the herd grazing upon the plain before them.

There were over a hundred in the herd, of all ages and colors. Standing a little to one side was a white stud, that seemed to be performing the duties of sentinel; for his head was erect, his massive neck arched, and his ears pricked up as though in the attitude of extreme vigilance. He was a noble-looking animal—a perfect picture, with mane and tail sweeping to the ground. He was known by the savages as White Lightning, a name suggested by his wonderful swiftness and instinct in detecting approaching danger. A hundred times, perhaps, had the Comanches endeavored to capture him, but they found no horse in their corrals sufficiently fleet to accomplish it. But, finally, Big Bear had the good luck to steal, from a band of Apaches, a horse that had long been noted for its speed, and upon this animal he set out, accompanied by a party of his braves, determined to capture White Lightning.

For days had they been in search of the herd with which he ran, and not until the present hour had they been able to get sight of him.

They were to the leeward of the herd, yet despite this advantage, the noble beast seemed to be suspicious of danger.

"Let my warriors mount and prepare for the chase," said Big Bear. "I will pursue White Lightning with the lasso, while you can keep to the right and left to head the herd off if it should turn either way. The way to the northward is long, and unbroken by hills and creeks. If the herd keeps in that direction, the race will be long, and ere darkness falls, Big Bear will ride into the Comanche village on White Lightning. There is none on the plains better with the lasso, although the fame of the white mustanger, Lasso Jack, is great. But he has tried to catch White Lightning and failed, and yet he bets his scalp against mine that he will ride the wild steed first. If he is honest, as Big Bear is, to-morrow he will come into my lodge and give me his scalp; for I am as certain of capturing the white steed as I am that my eyes see him now. Big Bear has spoken. Let my braves follow."

He took the lasso attached to the bow of his saddle in his right hand, and dashed from the woods down toward the wild horses. Being to the leeward of them, they had ridden several rods before the herd discovered them. When it did, they pricked up their ears, gave a snort of affright, and dashed away to the northward, their hoof-strokes sounding like the dull, incessant roar of thunder.

White Lightning took the lead of the herd, and as he swept onward, he presented a noble picture with his small head turned slightly to one side, his red nostrils dilated with terror and his mane and tail streaming out on the wind like a spotless banner of white.

Big Bear gained rapidly on his companions and the stragglers of the herd. Mile after mile was left behind in an incredibly short time. A long, serpent-like cloud of dust hanging on the air behind, marked the trail of the hunters. For an hour they swept on. Many of the feebler ones of the herd were passed, but the Comanches paid no attention to these. White Lightning was the sole object of that chase.

With eager eye Big Bear watched the flying steed, and his heart beat wildly with a feeling of joy and triumph when he saw he was gaining on the snowy steed. He pressed his animal to its utmost, and with its great, heavy burden the beast fairly flew over the plain, now gaining on the fugitive steed at every bound.

Nearer and nearer the Comanche chief approached to the one object of the race. Closer and closer his clashing hoofs sounded—now so close that the dust and dirt were flung back in his face—so close that he could almost reach him with his lasso.

The emotions of the savage chieftain became wild as he gained steadily upon the fugitive. And at length the moment for action came. The raw-hide lasso shot from the Indian's hands with a quick "whir" toward the steed. True to its aim, the fatal noose fell over the head of the wild horse and was gradually drawn taut around his throat.

The Comanche now reined in his animal by slow degrees until he finally brought it to a stand. The wild beast reared and plunged madly, striking the air with his feet and snorting fiercely, but his efforts only served to tighten the rope about his neck, and at last he made a desperate lunge, gasped and fell to the earth, *choked down!*

As none of his friends had yet come up, Big Bear sprung from his animal, and taking a heavy blanket from his saddle, he advanced toward the fallen beast, to throw it over his head, but before he could reach the animal, a figure sprung from the grass at his feet and dealt him a blow upon the head that sent him half blinded to the earth.

A yell burst from his lips, followed by the cry, "Lasso Jack! Lasso Jack!"

It was, indeed, Lasso Jack, who had sprung so suddenly from the grass near where the captured White Lightning lay. Dealing Big Bear a second blow as he attempted to regain his feet, and giving his horse a severe dig with his drawn knife, the Comanche's horse went careering wildly over the plain.

Then Jack, with marvelous skill, threw a portion of the lariat into the shape of a bridle, and, severing the thong at the animal's neck, White Lightning was free, and, as it gained its breath it struggled to its feet. *But a rider was upon its back!*

The young mustanger had mounted the wild, unconquered steed as he rose to his feet. The beast made two or three efforts to throw the rider off, but in vain. Jack sat as firm as though he had been a part of the horse himself and his extemporized bridle gave him a means of steering his infuriated steed into any desired course.

"Good-day, my dear Big Bear," Jack shouted back to the Indian as the steed dashed away; "I haven't got time to take your scalp to-day, but I'll see you another—"

The rest of the sentence was lost to the ears of the defeated, dumbfounded savage, by the distance that had so suddenly separated the enemies.

Big Bear had been robbed of his game. In the very moment of his triumph, he had met with shame, defeat. And, as he stood and watched the young mustanger flying away into the distance upon White Lightning, his rage and anger knew no bounds.

CHAPTER XII.

IN DESPAIR.

THE feelings of the two sisters, Rosalind and Mabel Garfield, can better be imagined

than I can describe them, when they found themselves alone, shut up in what yet might prove a living tomb. They knew the dangers to which Lasso Jack and his companions would be exposed, and that there was nothing certain that they would reach the fort alive.

After Jack had bid them good-by, they sat and listened to the faint sounds transmitted through the powder-horn ventilator. They heard the retreating hoof-strokes of their friends' horses, then all became silent as the grave.

The sisters sat waiting in breathless suspense, expecting each moment to hear the savages come to take possession of the deserted camp. Hours wore away thus waiting. At last they hear the thumping jar of hoofs upon the plain, mingled with the sound of excited voices that gradually deepen into savage yells of triumph. The maidens tremble with fear and suspense. They can hear their horses' footsteps as they walk about from place to place, and once low, suppressed cry escaped Mabel's lips, for they hear the dull thud of a hoof on the turf directly over them; they feel the fine dirt sift through on their hands and face, and hear the boards over them creak. Fear takes possession of them—a fear that a savage will ride upon the turf above them and break through into their retreat and crush them.

But they soon find relief from these fears. The savages pass on to the opposite side of the inclosure, yet they are not so far away but what they can hear them talking in fierce, vindictive tones that are finally mingled with yells of triumph, the crashing of boxes, and the bursting open of rum and brandy kegs.

The sisters know what is to follow. They know there was liquor in the traders' wagons, and that a drunken row was sure to be the result of its discovery. They scarcely breathe through fear of being heard, for they know they are in imminent peril, and they shudder to think what would be their fate were they to be caught now.

Hours go by. They can hear the savages charging about in drunken revel, but at length they grow quieter and quieter till the camp seemed deserted by all but one person, whom they can still hear, walking about, cursing and raving like a madman at his drunken comrades.

It was Juarez Diaz, the Texan Terror, but the maidens knew it not.

At length they begin to hear voices again, and know that the savages are awakening from a drunken sleep.

They hear words of command given by an authoritative voice. It is to harness animals to the wagons, gather up the strewn articles and put them in the wagons.

The maidens soon distinguished the rattling of harness chains; then followed a rumbling and crunching of wagon-wheels. Their hearts gave a great, joyful bound, for they knew the savages were leaving.

Soon all was silence, and the sisters breathed easier, for they realized that they had made a narrow escape from discovery.

"Thank God!" exclaimed Mabel, "they are gone at last—after an age of fear and suspense."

"Yes, and now we can hope for release soon, dear sister," replied Rosalind, "for it must be nearly if not altogether night."

"Look up through one of those holes over your head, Rosalind, and perhaps you can tell whether it is dark or not."

Rosalind felt about for the mouth of one of the horns, and when she had found it she applied her eyes to the orifice, but all was darkness where but a short time ago she could see a faint ray of daylight."

"It is night, it is night, Mabel," cried Rosalind, joyfully. "Lasso Jack and Dan will soon be here with assistance to relieve us."

Mabel's heart fluttered joyfully at her sister's words of encouragement—the hope of soon being free, but when her mind reverted to Henry St. Elmo, she almost wished she was in her grave, for what would life be to her without him? But, finally she said, seeing Lasso Jack had awakened a deep interest in Rosalind's young heart:

"Lasso Jack is a noble, brave fellow, Rosalind, and I cannot see how one so free-hearted and enthusiastic as you are can help admiring him. I know he is your style of—"

"Why—why, Mabel, what do you mean?" stammered Rosalind, confusedly.

"I mean what I say, you little hypocrite. Do you think that you can conceal from me your admiration for Lasso Jack?"

"You surprise me, Mabel, but I will frankly

admit Lasso Jack is worthy any woman's love. Yes, dear sister, and I know my heart would break if the news should come to me that he was dead, as it did to you of Henry, not saying that I love Jack more than you did Henry. I never knew what love was till I met Jack, and now I can imagine how you suffer at heart, Mabel; yet I feel certain Henry is not dead. Something tells me so."

"Oh, if I knew he lived I could wait here a month, Rosalind, for his coming, but I am—"

"Hark, Mabel! what noise is that?"

The sisters listened. They heard a slight noise like that of falling rain, and after they had listened several minutes, then all relapsed into silence again.

The sisters waited anxiously for the coming of Lasso Jack to their rescue, for they were fully satisfied that night had long since set in. They ate some of their food, not, however, because they were hungry, but to give themselves the strength they knew they would need when their friends came to take them away.

But, the hours wore on and no one came. Still they waited and waited, but all in vain. They knew that the night was almost spent, and their hitherto bright hopes began to grow clouded. Then they thought that perhaps Lasso Jack had been detained, but would yet come.

And still the hours sped. At last Rosalind applied her eyes to their small look-out, and a cry of delight burst from her lips.

"What is it sister?" questioned Mabel.

"The night has passed and a new day dawned. Oh, Mabel! I fear something dreadful has happened Jack and his friends!"

"Let us hope for the best, sister," replied Mabel; "they may have only been detained in getting to the fort. We should not despair yet."

They ate their breakfast and whiled away the time in recounting the trials of their journey and the bitter experiences of their young lives. But, as the hours wore away, each one grew longer and longer to the impatient sisters.

At noon a faint glimmer of sunshine—a mere thread of light, like a ray of hope, struggled down through one of the open horns, whose mouth was inclined a little southward, into their dark retreat. But when that faint thread of sunshine melted away, they knew the sun had crossed the meridian and was declining westward, and from that minute their spirits began to decline also.

They waited for several more weary hours, until they knew it must be nearly night; then Rosalind's courage gave way, and she burst forth, almost in despair:

"Mabel, they are not coming. They have been slain or captured! We have got to escape from here and take our chances of reaching the hacienda of the old rancho spoken of by Jack."

"We could never reach there alive, little sister!" moaned Mabel. "Oh, may Heaven aid us in this trying hour!"

"Shall we not try to remove this covering over us, Mabel?" asked Rosalind.

"Yes," cried Mabel; "let us get out of this place into the open air, or I shall suffocate!"

Rosalind placed her hands against the boards that supported the covering of turf and sod, and endeavored to push them upward, but her feeble strength was inadequate to the task. She could not move them.

"Mabel, you will have to assist me," she said.

Mabel came to her assistance, and together they pushed upward on the boards with all their united strength, but they might just as well have endeavored to lift up the dome of a rocky cavern, for they could not move it. Again and again they tried it, but without success, and at last they gave it up and sunk down with a cry of despair.

"Oh, my God, Rosalind, we are inclosed in a living tomb—buried alive!" moaned Mabel.

"Do not—oh, do not talk so, Mabel!" replied Rosalind; "let us hope for a more pleasant fate—a more comfortable death-bed!"

"We can not deny the plain yet terrible truth, Rosalind. How are we to escape from here? Surely by no effort of our own, and without a doubt those who know we are buried here are powerless—not if dead—to help us."

"Let us rally our courage, and try to look at the bright side of the picture, even if we are in a dungeon. You see I have the hunting-knife that Lasso Jack gave me to slice our venison with. With it I can probably enlarge one of the holes overhead, then we can reach out and remove the sod, block by block, as it was placed over us. In this way, we may yet escape from here."

"True, true, Rosalind. It is well you are not as thoughtless as I am; but then you know it is my nature, sister, to fret and give right up,

even when I should be the most determined and resolute."

Drawing one of the horns from its place, Rosalind began to enlarge the hole in the box-lid.

But this she soon found a hopeless task. The wood was hard almost as iron, and her feeble strength, and that of Mabel, were unable to complete the job before them. At least, it would require hours of incessant labor. But, without a despairing murmur, she worked away, being relieved occasionally by Mabel.

Thus, for hours, the sisters worked on, but they found their diligence had been poorly rewarded, for the hole had been enlarged just sufficiently to enable Rosalind to put her hand and arm out.

This the maiden did, and with the knife she shaved the dirt and sod away, until the hole was of uniform size to the surface of the ground or sod above them.

They were enabled to see out now quite easily. They beheld a number of stars twinkling in the blue dome of heaven. They put their hands out and felt the cool evening wind upon them. It made them long for its freedom, and renewed their hopes.

And so Rosalind began clipping away at their prison door, but in the midst of her labor, she gave the knife a sudden wrench, and snapped the steel blade in two. With this accident faded all their hopes of escape, and both again sunk down in despair.

They threw their arms about each other's neck, and burst into an agony of tears. But in the midst of their bitter emotions, a sound suddenly rushed athwart the darkness. It was a sound that caused them to start and choke down their sobs and listen.

They recognized the sound as the tread of a horse's hoofs, and the clink of a bit-ring.

The fear of perishing in their retreat overbalanced all other fear and precautions, and at the top of her lungs Rosalind called for help.

Then they listened for the result. They could still hear the thump of hoofs above them, moving about apparently in a circle around them.

"It must be a friend, Mabel," said Rosalind, in a whisper.

"It may be, but it is none of those that left us here, or else they would not be groping about, apparently, searching for the spot."

"What had we better do?"

"Why not call again, then put out your hand to show him where we are," replied Mabel.

Rosalind called to the unknown horseman again, then she bravely thrust her hand and arm out at the opening, in hopes of attracting attention.

The next moment after she had withdrawn her hand, they heard a soft footstep approaching them.

Then a dark shadow fell across their look-out overhead.

Gazing out, Rosalind saw the figure of a man standing over their retreat, plainly outlined against the starry sky, and it was now that it occurred to her that it might be an Indian warrior or prairie freebooter, and the thought sent the blood, in icy currents, back to her stout young heart.

CHAPTER XIII.

THEY ARE GONE.

A BAND of some fifty horsemen broke camp on the San Saba, at daybreak, and pushed their course southward, at a goodly speed. They were all well mounted, armed alike, and wore the uniform of the United States soldiers. In fact, it was a detachment of soldiers, a part of Captain Louis Gray's command, that had been sent out from Fort — to punish a band of Comanches and freebooters, under the notorious Texan Terror, that had managed to get south of them, and were raiding and murdering the settlers and emigrants along the overland trail.

They had only been out one day's ride from the fort, but now as they galloped onward over the plain, they expected any minute to bring them in sight of a party of the marauding foe. They felt perfectly secure, even against odds, for the superiority of their horses and weapons would give them a decided advantage in an open prairie conflict.

The party rode on, stopping only a few minutes to noon, and as the sun was near its setting, Lieutenant Jourdan descired a horseman some distance to the southward, riding directly toward them, at a fearful speed.

The lieutenant at once ordered a halt, and his men into line, for he knew not but that it was a fugitive flying from a band of savages. But in this they were happily disappointed, for they soon discovered the horseman was entirely

alone. They saw that he was mounted upon a spirited, snow-white horse, without saddle or bridle, and seemed to have but little control over the animal's movements.

On he came, now so close, that the rangers could distinguish his form and features. It was the renowned youth, Lasso Jack, the young mustanger.

A shout pealed from their lips, for, of all others, the presence of Lasso Jack was most desirable.

As he came still nearer, they saw that his horse, a beautiful white mustang, with flowing white mane and tail, was foaming with sweat, and unmanageable with fear and affright, they little dreaming it was the renowned wild steed, White Lightning, with its first rider upon its back.

When he discovered the rangers, Lasso Jack exerted his utmost to check the flying steed; but he found it was a task likely to require some trouble and exertion. He determined he would not lose the animal, for he found, by experience, that it was the fastest he had ever backed. Reaching forward, he passed his hands along the animal's neck, permitting them to extend gradually to his head, then down to his muzzle, when he quickly grasped the beast by the nose and closed his nostrils.

In this manner the noble beast was soon smothered down, and came to a full stop, before he had quite reached the rangers. Then, with the lasso that was still looped around his nose, the young mustanger made a slip-noose, passed it inside the mouth, and over the lower jaw, and in a moment more, White Lightning was in the power of Lasso Jack.

The youth now proceeded, in the true manner of the wild-horse tamer, to conquer and bring its wild spirit into gentle submission. This he had, in a great measure accomplished, ere the rangers came up, for in the management of the wild horse, there were none in the South-west that could excel Lasso Jack.

"Hello, Jack Clarkson, what does all this mean?" questioned Lieutenant Jourdan, as they galloped up.

"I've got White Lightning, at last, lieutenant," replied Lasso Jack, "and I tell you he came in good play at a good time, too."

"Why, what is the matter, Jack? Anything wrong?"

"Wrong!" exclaimed Jack; "yes, the whole Comanche nation is an accursed wrong! It is a God-send that I have met you here. The red devils have been doing their worst."

"What have they been doing, Jack?"

"Have slain all but seven of a party of three-and-twenty persons, and Captain Louis Gray was one of the killed."

"Great God! is this possible, Jack?" cried Lieutenant Jourdan, while exclamations of surprise and sorrow passed from lip to lip of the men.

Jack briefly narrated the adventures of the party upon the plain, the terrible siege of the band, and death of most of its noble defenders, and how their escape was finally effected, after they had concealed the captain's nieces in a box under ground.

The rangers received the terrible news with sad hearts, for they dearly loved Captain Gray.

After he had concluded his story, Lieutenant Jourdan asked:

"Have you any hopes of the girls' escaping discovery?"

"I have, lieutenant. But, they may only escape discovery by the savages to perish in a living tomb. I was to have been back this morning at furthest, to relieve them. I hope, for heaven's sake, Jourdan, you will take your men and go with me to their rescue."

"Of course I will, Jack; mount your horse and lead the way."

"Thank God!" exclaimed Jack; then with but little difficulty he mounted his trembling, conquered steed, and heading him southward, galloped sharply away, with Lieutenant Jourdan at his side, and his rangers following close behind.

When they were fairly under way, Jourdan asked:

"Where are the rest of your friends that escaped?"

"I cannot say. I left them all far behind, after we escaped from our breastwork of wagons. Old Dan Dorne was among them."

"Old Dan Dorne! As brave a man as ever pulled trigger. I hope we will meet them all."

"I am afraid the chances are against them," said Jack, "for a score of Comanche devils were after them."

"And how came you aboard of White Light-

"After our escape from the wagon-corral I rode on until my horse fell dead under me. Then I took it on foot. While thus journeying I saw a band of Comanches riding rapidly toward me; and to escape being seen, if I had not been already, I threw myself in the tall grass. The savages proved to be a party in pursuit of wild horses, and one of them, the notorious Big Bear, succeeded in lassoing this horse, just as he came up to where I lay. The horse was thrown within three feet of me. I knew I would be discovered if I remained there, so I sprung to my feet. I knocked Big Bear down, cut the lasso that held White Lightning, and as he rose to his feet, I sprung upon his back, and away we shot like a meteor over the plain, in exactly the direction I wanted to go."

"By heavens! you ran a wonderful risk of your life, Jack!"

"Yes, lieutenant, and all for those two fair girls buried on the plain, miles from here."

"Ah, Lasso Jack, I see you are—"

"Look yonder, ahead! A horseman!" broke in one of the rangers, in a stentorian voice.

True enough, a horseman was observed riding toward them, swinging his hat in a manner to attract attention from the rangers.

The party rode on until they met him. To their joy and surprise it was old Dan Dorne. He was flushed with excitement, and his horse about exhausted with hard riding.

"Hullo, Jack, lieutenant and friends! Glad to meet you, by heavens I am!" the old hunter guide exclaimed, nearly out of breath, before either of the others could speak.

"Why, Dan? What is it? What's up?"

"The devil's to pay, Jack. Sir George Richardson is a willin' prisoner—has turned traitor to us, and at this holy minute he and Texan Terror are goin' back to git the gals we left concealed in the box on the plain!"

"Great God!" exclaimed Jack, in accents of despair, "then the girls are lost, lost! But, Dan, I can hardly believe Sir George is such a villain."

"I could hardly b'lieve it either, fur awhile, but it's so, Jack."

"What evidence have you to substantiate the fact?"

"The evidence of my own eyes and ears," returned Dan.

There could be no doubt of his story now, for Dan Dorne was known to be a man of truth, and to never circulate reports that he could not prove.

"Then let us ride on, boys, for heaven's sake," said Jack; "I wish I could discredit Dan's story, but who ever knew him to be at fault in such matters?"

"Forward, men, forward!" exclaimed Lieutenant Jourdan, and the next instant the whole band went sweeping away at a gallop over the plain.

Old Dan Dorne accompanied them.

The emotions of Lasso Jack now were anything but pleasant. The thought of Sir George turning traitor and going back with the inhuman Texan Terror to recover the maidens, filled his heart with bitter anguish and agonizing impatience. He knew there were grounds for Sir George's conduct—that he had been very attentive to Rosalind, and that attention amounted to more than mere gallantry. Yet, he never dreamed that his frank, open manhood and moral courage could descend so low in the scale of manliness as to turn traitor and take sides with such an inhuman foe as Texan Terror, in order to obtain by force, that which he could not obtain by a free, open course of honesty and right.

The party rode sharply on and at dark struck the wagon-trail about ten miles from where the maidens had been concealed. Taking the trail they galloped on by twos, Jack and Lieutenant Jourdan keeping the lead.

The moon was just coming up when the party came in sight of the clay bank thrown from the pit near where the girls had been concealed. They did not expect to find the wagons there, for Dan had seen them miles from there in a little grove, where the freebooters had concealed them.

With a heart beating with all the agony of fear and suspense, Lasso Jack turned from the trail and rode toward the mound of yellow dirt. Dismounting, he gave his horse in care of one of the rangers and hurried forward toward the place where he had left the maidens.

But, as he neared the spot, a cry of agony burst from his lips and he staggered back as if from a ghost.

Before him he saw the excavation that had been made for the girls. It was open and the maidens were gone!

"Are they gone?"

It was Lieutenant Jourdan who asked the question.

"Yes, they are gone, lieutenant, gone!"

"Ah! what is that?—a lifeless body, as I live."

They advanced and bent over the prostrate, lifeless form that lay a few paces away.

The haggard face was upturned in the moonlight, and the glassy eyes were wide open and staring up at the starry sky.

"By Heaven, lieutenant!" exclaimed Jack; "don't you recognize that face?"

"I do not."

"It is the face of Juarez Diaz, the Texan Terror!"

And he was dead—stark and stiff. But who had slain him?

CHAPTER XIV.

ENGLISHMAN VERSUS FREEBOOTER.

It now becomes necessary that we should go back and follow up the adventuresome footsteps of Sir George Richardson.

After their escape from the wagon-corral on the prairie, the party, including Sir George, Old Dan and the two traders, tried to keep up with Lasso Jack, but failed. The young mustanger soon left them all far behind, and being mounted upon one of the heavy draught-horses, Sir George soon found himself far behind all the rest. He could not make his animal go out of a slow, tiresome gallop, and escape from the pursuing savages he saw at once was an impossibility.

He was armed with nothing but the indispensable gold-headed cane, and he seemed to regard his capture, now that it was so promising, with a cool indifference. In fact, when he saw that it was useless to belabor his horse for a speed that was not in him, that capture was certain, he calmly drew rein, tied a handkerchief to the end of his cane and waved it above his head.

There were those among the pursuers who knew the import of the flag and conveyed its meaning to their friends.

The next minute the Englishman was surrounded by the savage horde, among whom were several white renegades.

"Hullo, here!" exclaimed one of the latter; "what have we got here so cheaply? A white-livered coward?" and he eyed Sir George with a comical grin upon his brutal dissipated face.

"H'owing to the superiority *hof* your 'orse-flesh, *hi* suppose you 'ave a prisoner *hof* war," replied Sir George.

"Humph!" ejaculated the renegade mouthpiece, "we never take prisoners of war."

"Very well, *hi* am willing to go free *hon* parole."

"When you leave us it will be without your scalp."

"Oh, *hindeed!*—the devil you say, you savage barbarian. Well, sir, *hi* am a child *hof* fate, but *hi* you git my scalp you will 'ave to fight for *hit*."

"Well, well, Britisher, you've got a leetle grit, ain't you? But, seein' as what you've got no weapons but a harmless cane, I guess you can jist ride on with us, and when we git more time we'll see what yer made of."

"*h*Exactly, friend barbarian; lead on and *hi* will follow you with *hall* the 'onor *hof* a prisoner of war."

Two of the party took Sir George in charge, while the rest of them galloped on in pursuit of the other flying fugitives.

As they rode on, Sir George kept a close watch upon the movements of his conductors, in hopes of catching them off their guard. In case he did, it was his intention to deal them a blow upon the head with his cane, knock them off their horses, which he would then stampede and make his escape. But no such an opportunity was offered. Despite his indifference to captivity, the eyes of the savage captors were constantly upon him.

They rode on, and as no opportunity for escape was offered, Sir George found himself at dark in camp in a cottonwood grove with the whole band of Comanches and freebooters.

The party that had captured him had been joined during the evening by Texan Terror and his band, and to this chieftain's mercy the captive was now turned over.

The band numbered about four-score, and experienced no fears of being pursued, but lay and sat about their camp-fires in perfect peace of mind. No guards were posted, for they knew there was no enemy within miles of them that was of sufficient strength to give them the least trouble. Yet at the very moment they considered themselves free from all prying eyes and miles from an enemy, Old Dan Dorne was skulking within ear-shot of their camp.

And to the old hunter's surprise he saw that

Sir George was allowed the privileges of the camp, and with his cane in hand was moving about with all the freedom of Texan Terror himself.

This seemed a little strange to the old guide—he could not understand its meaning. He knew that Sir George was quite ingratiating in his conversational faculties when he was a mind to be, but he did not think he could work himself into the confidence of an Indian, despite the magic of his tongue, so deeply as to be permitted the entire freedom of the camp. And from what he had seen of Sir George, he could not think there was a traitorous element about him.

But, he was soon destined to change his opinion.

In the course of the evening he saw Texan Terror button-hole the Englishman and lead him to one side out of ear-shot of the savages, and enter into a private conversation with him.

Now was old Dan's chance to learn the meaning of Sir George's freedom and intimacy with the Mexican freebooter, and creeping along under shadow of the trees, he succeeded in gaining a point within easy ear-shot of the twain, and the first sentence he heard caused him to start with surprise. It was put in the form of a question, thus:

"Then the girls are alive, eh?"

It was Texan Terror who asked the question.

"Yes, they *hare* halive," he heard Sir George reply.

"Did Lasso Jack and Old Dan Dorne carry them off?" the guide again heard Diaz ask.

"No; we left them within the inclosure of wagons before we came away."

"Sacred!" exclaimed the freebooter in surprise.

"I believe you are lying, man!"

"That *his* cool, *hold* feller, but *hi* ham hable to prove *hall* *hi* say, Mr. Diaz."

"Able to prove that you left the nieces of Captain Gray on the prairie within the inclosure of wagons?"

"Yes."

"I believe yet you are lying. Where did you leave them?—surely not in any of the wagons."

"No, not at *hall*, Texan Terror. But then *hi* ham not willing to tell you where they *hare* unless you will *hagree* to one thing."

"And suppose I won't agree to it?" retorted Texan Terror.

"Then *hi* will not tell where the girls *hare*."

"Then you will lose your scalp."

"*hi* ham ready to die, *hand* die game too."

Texan Terror's brow knitted with anger, then he became thoughtful. He was studying some way to circumvent the Englishman. At last he said:

"You should remember, sir, that you, as a common subject, are not to dictate to me, Texan Terror."

"*h*Oh, *hindeed!* *hi* beg your pardon, my Lord Terror, but *hi* thought we'd better *henter* into *han* alliance of friendship, now that we *hare* friends together."

"So we are, but then you are to be recognized only as a common warrior."

"*h*Exactly; but in the girl case *hi* propose to 'ave my own way or *b'ust*. If you want to know where they *hare*, you must come to my terms. If not, you may lift my scalp and be damed."

Texan Terror frowned ferociously, then replied:

"Name your desires, then."

"Thank you. Well, there is a girl *hapiee* for us. *hi* am to 'ave my choice *hand* you take the other. Both *hare* very pretty, *hexremely* *andsome*. Now if you will go with me *halone*, *hi* will take you to where the maidens *hare*. We will 'ave to be in a 'urry too, unless Lasso Jack will be back and get them before we reach there."

"Why not take a few warriors along as an escort?" asked Diaz, a little suspiciously.

"Not *ha* warrior, Mister Terror, else *hi* don't go. *hi* will die first. We two must go *halone*—take *hextra* 'orses for the maidens to ride. *hi* tell you, Terror, they *hare* pretty, lovely and *hangelic*. You will be a 'appy man to get one of them."

The Englishman had succeeded in rendering the will of the brutal, sensual freebooter perfectly pliable, and had no trouble now in bending it to suit his own purposes, whatever they were.

The desire to possess one of the lovely maidens of whom he had heard so much from the lips of his spies, completely overbalanced all other desires and dulled the precautionary instinct of the Mexican chief, and he was ready to do anything Sir George proposed. But at the same time he held the Englishman in ignominious contempt, as a cowardly, weak-minded

creature, whose life he was only sparing for the secrets that he hoped to compel him to divulge.

And there was an undercurrent in Sir George's conversation that Dan Dorne failed to fathom, for he was too enraged to think of aught else but of slaying the cowardly traitor, and more than once he grasped his rifle to do the deed, but his better judgment at once prevailed, and he desisted from an act that was sure to bring danger down upon his own head.

Returning to camp, Texan Terror at once ordered four of the best horses in the corral bridled and saddled, and when they were brought out, the prairie chief and Sir George mounted, and with a led horse each, took their departure from camp.

"By cracky!" exclaimed old Dan, "I'll stop their game, and their circulation too. I'll carry the scalp o' Sir George alongside o' that o' Texan Terror to the fort."

And thus musing to himself, the old guide did his utmost to get in ahead, but, they took a different course from what he expected, and escaped the death he had prepared for them.

On over the prairie the grim Texan Terror galloped, side by side with his new friend, Sir George. The emotions of the two, as they rode onward side by side, will never be known, but judging from the nervousness with which they would regard each other occasionally, it was evident that something antagonistic lurked within their breasts.

Sir George still carried his cane, which came in good play now as a riding-whip. But the secret connected with that cane was unknown to all save its owner; but Diaz might have suspected something had he noticed the glances Sir George gave him occasionally, accompanied by a quick, nervous movement with the cane.

Hour after hour they galloped on, the clatter of their horses' hoofs being the only sound that broke the solemn silence of the midnight hour. As the point of their destination drew near, the emotions of the two became stirred up to a high pitch of excitement, but while Texan Terror's emotions were those of anxiety and impatience to possess one of the girls, Sir George's were far different.

At length they drew near the mound of fresh dirt throw out to conceal that taken from the excavation in which the maidens had been concealed.

As they drew near the mound, Sir George gazed around him as though laboring under a guilty conscience, then drew rein and dismounted. Texan Terror did likewise. Then side by side they advanced toward the place where he—Sir George—had helped to conceal the girls.

Suddenly the Englishman came to a dead halt.

"By St. George!" he exclaimed, pointing to a second hole in the ground before him, "the girls *hare* gone, Terror; there is where they were concealed."

Had his hat-rim not shaded his eyes as he spoke, Texan Terror might have seen the light of joy that beamed in his eyes. As it was, however, the freebooter turned like a maddened beast and glared upon him. There was latent meaning enough in the Englishman's words to arouse a demon within his wicked heart.

"Villain!" he finally burst forth, "you have been deceiving me all the time!"

"Indeed, my lord, I 'ave not. *hi* 'elped to put the girls there *hin* that very *hexcavation*. But, they *hare* gone, *hand* we *hare* disappointed—both *hof* us, my lord," replied Sir George, as a strange smile swept over his face; "some one 'as found the maidens, *hand* taken them *haway*."

"Rascal, you are lying!" roared the pirate chief; "you have deceived me—got me here through hopes of getting away, yourself!"

"*h*Oh no, my lord, *hi* could not deceive *you*."

"Wretch, do not add fuel to my wrath! I see through your whole cunning scheme! I see why you were so anxious for us to come alone. You expected to meet some white friends here and help you out. But in this you have been deceived, and now your miserable life—which is a perfect lie itself, shall pay for your cunning; you shall die!"

He grasped the haft of his tomahawk and started toward his victim, his eyes glowing with a deadly malignant fire. But Sir George was on the alert, and before the villain could disengage his tomahawk from his girdle, a long, glittering blade leaped from the staff of Sir George's cane and was driven to the heart of the freebooter.

With a shriek, a convulsive gasp, a wild clutching at the open air, Texan Terror staggered forward, and fell dead.

"Ha! ah! ah!" laughed Sir George, in a low,

silent manner; "this hends our haliance, Mr. Terror. You're ha bigger fool than *hi* took you to be. *hi* worked my ropes well, *hi* must hadmit. *hi* was satisfied the girls would be gone before we got 'ere, else *hi* would never 'ave brought the villain 'ere. *hi* 'ope the girls hare in good 'ands. But what's to become *ho* this poor *h*English vagat and? Well, well, *hi* guess *hi* will take these four 'orses hand lean hout for tall timber, *ha*'s my friend, Daniel Dorne, says."

He mounted his horse, and with the other three, set off toward the north. He had not ridden over two hundred yards when the clatter of hoofs, and the jingle of what seemed to be sabers, fell upon his ears. The sound came from the west. He halted and gazed back. He saw a number of horsemen galloping along the plain, and from the flashing of their arms, their uniforms, and the trappings upon their horses, he was convinced that it was a party of soldiers; and he had not a doubt but that Lasso Jack was at the head of them, coming to the rescue of the maidens.

So turning about, Sir George rode back toward the party.

CHAPTER XV.

A JOYFUL MEETING.

HENRY ST. ELMO sat like an image of stone and gazed upon that white hand and arm, protruding upward through the ground. It was a mystery he could not solve—something that filled him with a strange awe. And that voice, coming, as it seemed, from everywhere, sounded like a voice that he had heard in a wild, yet pleasant dream.

He sat motionless for several moments, and watched that hand. He saw what was possessed of life. He saw it move, and finally disappear, down in the earth.

Then to his ears came another cry.

Henry possessed not a tithe of superstition. After seeing and hearing—all the evidence he could desire—what he did, he knew all could be readily fathomed. So, dismounting, he advanced to where he had seen the hand.

He found a small, circular hole—like the hole of a ground-squirrel—but there was no other sign of the earth having been disturbed. This was very strange indeed.

"Is there any one about here in darkness?" he asked.

A cry of joy greeted his ears. It issued from the earth at his feet, and it was a woman's cry. Henry felt strangely impressed. How had any one been buried alive there, without there being some evidence of the ground having been broken?

"Who are you, and where are you whom I can hear?"

"Oh, Rosalind!" came in plain, excited words to his ears, "it is surely his voice—the voice of Henry St. Elmo!"

Henry started. It was surely the voice of his darling, Mabel Garfield. Still it seemed impossible, and he cried:

"Yes, I am Henry St. Elmo; but who are you, and where are you?"

"Oh, Henry! It is Mabel! We are fastened up here in the earth and cannot get out!"

The truth began to force itself upon the mind of the young mustanger. The train had been attacked, and to elude being captured, the maidens had been concealed under the ground.

Quick as thought he sunk down upon his knees, and began tearing at the earth about the hole. The turf came up easily in blocks, revealing a wooden support beneath.

One by one he removed the blocks of sod, until the whole top of the maidens' box retreat was laid bare. Then, like one in a mad frenzy, he tore off the boards, and moonbeams streaming down into the box, revealed to him the white, sad faces of Mabel and Rosalind Garfield, upturned to his.

With a cry of surprise, he reached down and lifted them from their retreat.

"Mabel, my darling!" he cried, "what does this mean?"

"Oh, Harry!" moaned Mabel, as he folded her to his throbbing breast, and imprinted kisses of the wildest joy upon her pale brow.

"Dear Mabel," the young mustanger replied, scarcely knowing what he said, "this surely is not reality—that we meet thus."

"Yes, yes, it is reality, Henry, and but for your coming we would have perished in a living tomb."

"Tell me, darling, why it is that you are here? Has trouble befallen your train? Have you seen my friend, Lasso Jack?"

Mabel stayed her emotions of joy, and narrated the terrible trials and troubles through which they had passed since Lasso Jack first

made his appearance in the camp on Clear Creek, up to that hour.

Henry received the news with a feeling of sorrow and anguish. He then narrated his own adventures, from the time he had separated from Lasso Jack, up to the moment he heard their imploring cries for help.

It was a joyous meeting, and they talked on for some time. Finally Rosalind asked:

"Where will we go now, Henry, for safety?"

"I will take you," replied Henry, "to a settlement, north of here, from which we can go to Fort — and from thence to Santa Fe."

"Tis fortunate for us that we have met you, Henry," said Rosalind, "for I fear Lasso Jack and his friends will never come back."

"Why not, Rosalind?"

"I am afraid they have all been killed."

"It may be possible, but it will take a good many Comanches ever to catch Lasso Jack."

A light of joy beamed in Rosalind's dark, lustrous eyes, to hear Henry speak thus of her hero.

"But, should Jack ever come back and find us gone, what will he think?"

"He will no doubt be uneasy, but it will not do for us to leave a note here telling him where we have gone, for an enemy is just as apt to get it as he is. I will take you to the settlement, then look after Jack and his friends."

Rosalind could scarcely suppress her emotions of joy, while Mabel cried and laughed by turns when she realized that her lover, whom she had mourned as dead, was alive and by her side.

At length Henry said:

"We must not tarry here longer, girls. There is no telling what dangers are lurking around us. You two must mount my horse and ride. I will walk, and guide you across the plain."

The maidens prepared themselves as well as possible for the journey. The remainder of their food was packed for future use. Henry then assisted them to the back of his pony, and taking the rein, turned northward and began their journey. Nor were they a minute too soon, for they had gone scarcely twenty rods when he heard horses coming up the road from the west.

He glanced back and saw two horsemen rising upon a little swell in the prairie against the moonlit sky. He knew at once that they were not friends, for one of them he saw wore a broad-brimmed sombrero, with a large plume attached to it. He recognized by these, the wearer of the hat and plume. It was the Mexican freebooter, Texan Terror!

The young mustanger quickened his pace until the animal that carried the girls was hurried into a slow trot, and in this manner they soon put quite a distance between them and the prairie pirates.

They traveled steadily onward in silence, and at a goodly speed.

The night wore away, and, just as the sun streamed across the great plain, the trio descended into the deep, wooded valley through which wound the San Saba river.

"When we reach that timber," said Henry, "we will rest a few minutes, girls, for I know you must be greatly fatigued."

They descended into the valley and entered the timber. Under a green, shady oak they came to a halt. The maidens were assisted to dismount, and the mustang lariated, to browse among the tender foliage.

Their meager supply of food was produced, and eaten with good relish.

Feeling greatly refreshed by their rest and morning meal, the little party was about to resume its journey, when the watchful eye of Henry St. Elmo discovered a number of mounted Indians riding along the summit of the bluffs eastward of them, about half a mile. They were out upon the prairie, and although our friends were concealed from their view in the timber, Henry's fears became great, for he saw that the savages were traveling eastward, and would cross their trail at right angles. He knew that the trail would not escape the keen eyes of the warriors, for it was plainly defined through the dew-wet grass.

In breathless anxiety the young mustanger watched them, and when he saw them reach the trail, stop, and gaze away to the north, and then the south, his worst fears were realized—the savages had discovered his trail!

He watched them a moment. He saw one of them dismount and examine the trail, then the whole band, a score or more, turned on the trail and rode directly toward the timber.

Informing the girls of the crisis, the next minute they had resumed their journey at a rapid speed.

Ten minutes' journeying brought them to the

river, and the sight of a canoe lying empty on the bank suggested the idea of abandoning the horse and taking to the water. He knew it would be an easy matter for the lynx-eyed savages to follow the hoof-prints of the mustang, while the canoe would leave no trail.

Assisting the girls to dismount he turned the pony loose, having first placed the burr of a cactus under the saddle. This pricked the animal and sent him flying down the river, as Henry desired, for he felt in hopes the savages would overlook the division of the party, and follow on after the flying mustang.

The young man now launched the canoe and assisted the maidens into it. He then took the paddle, and driving the craft out into the river, turned and moved up its course.

They found this manner of journeying less fatiguing than on horseback, and the spirits of the maidens began to revive. The air was cool and bracing, and came laden with the sweet perfumes of the wildwood, and this, together with the easy, gliding motion of the canoe, the regularplash, splash of the oars, lulled the sisters into a dreamy, delicious forgetfulness, such as precedes sleep of a worn, fatigued mind.

Suddenly the languid eyes of Mabel were lifted to those of her lover, and a low cry escaped her lips.

She saw that his head was bent in the attitude of listening, and that his face denoted sudden fear.

"What is it, Henry? Are we in danger?" she asked.

"I fear we are discovered, darling," he responded, as he turned his canoe abruptly in toward the southern shore of the river, under a low rock that projected several feet over the water, and from whose face a curtain of moss and wild vines had grown down, trailing almost to the water's surface. It was an admirable hiding-place, but just such a place as an Indian in search of them would be sure to look. However, Henry had hoped that if it were Indians coming down the river, they were not in search of them, and so would pass on by. Still they were being detained, and every moment lost by them was the savages' gain.

The shadows of the rock and curtain of vines made it dark almost as twilight gloom where they were concealed, but within ten feet of them the broad glare of light lay upon the placid bosom of the river, in which were reflected the trees that lined the shore and the ragged edges of the rocks above them.

An hour of anxious waiting wore by, and the young mustanger had decided to resume his journey, and was in the act of pushing out into the stream, when Rosalind's hand was laid upon his arm in a quick, excited manner.

"Look there," she said, in a whisper, pointing through the curtain of vines down at the water where the rock above them was mirrored in the glassy waves.

Henry looked as directed and saw the figure of a man reflected in the waters. He was evidently standing on the edge of the rock above them, and so plainly was he defined, that our friends had no trouble in recognizing him to be an Indian warrior.

The fugitives scarcely breathed, so afraid were they of being discovered, for they knew the panther-footed savage was not over ten feet from them, and the least sigh or splash would catch his practiced ear.

They watched the figure in the waters with bated breath. They saw it advance to the edge of the rock and, apparently, peer down.

This sent the blood in icy currents through Henry's veins, for he believed the savage suspected some one being concealed under the rock.

A moment later they saw the mirrored figure stretch out an arm, then a pebble dropped in the water within four or five feet of them.

What did this mean? Henry was at a loss to understand, and while he sat pondering, he saw the figure disappear. This gave him a relief that was only momentary, for he at once saw a dozen or more Comanche warriors appear from the woods on the opposite side of the river and move down toward the bank.

They were a hunting-party. This Henry saw from the loads of fresh meat they carried. They proceeded down almost to the water's edge, then stopped and deposited their game on the green, grassy bank with an exclamation of relief.

This convinced Henry that they had halted there to rest, and his conjectures were soon verified by seeing a number of the party throw themselves upon the earth, and assume an attitude of ease and listlessness.

Henry felt sorely vexed. He was bound to

remain under the rock as long as the savages remained on the opposite shore, for, if he attempted to escape, he would be compelled to push out in plain view of the savages.

For more than an hour they waited, but, instead of their situation growing less perilous by the departure of the foe, they were suddenly startled by seeing another party of fully forty mounted warriors coming up the river.

They came on to where the hunters were, halted and dismounted. This convinced our friends that the point had been selected as a rendezvous. The warriors unharnessed their ponies and turned them loose to browse, then stacked their spears and rifles in the center of the grassy knoll and assumed such positions of rest as their desires dictated.

But, where was the Indian who had been upon the rock—that our friends saw mirrored in the dazzling waters?

Scarcely had the young mustanger asked himself the question, than all three of them became conscious of a dull, vibratory shock of their canoe.

They turned and gazed around them, and each tongue was paralyzed with sudden terror, when each eye saw the tufted head and painted face of an Indian warrior appear above the rim of their canoe.

The maidens' faces were blanched with terror, and the hand of St. Elmo involuntarily sought his knife. But the fears of the trio were set at ease by seeing the warrior raise his hand before his face with the palm turned outward, significant of friendship and silence; and it was then that the party discovered, despite his paint and feathers, that the supposed Indian warrior was Lasso Jack, the young mustanger!

CHAPTER XVI.

ON THE FUGITIVES' TRACKS.

LASSO JACK and Lieutenant Jourdan were not a little surprised at finding the body of Texan Terror by the hole where the maidens had been concealed. And Jack's fears and uncertainties regarding the maidens' absence were painful.

Circumstances argued to him that the freebooters and Indians had come and taken the maidens, and that an altercation regarding possession of them had probably taken place between some of the parties, and Juarez Diaz had been slain.

But, while the young mustanger and the lieutenant stood discussing the matter, the "swish" of feet in the grass suddenly arrested their attention.

Turning, they saw a man with four horses in his possession riding toward them.

A single glance enabled Lasso Jack to recognize the man as Sir George Richardson, and in an instant it flashed across his mind that the Englishman had slain Texan Terror.

As he approached, Jack accosted him with the question:

"Who comes here?"

"Sir George Richardson, my dear friend Jack," was the response.

"Sir George, the traitor!" yelled out Old Dan Dorne; "seize him, men, and let's hang him to onc't."

"Why, my dear friend Dan, you must be slightly hinebriated," returned Sir George, drawing rein and dismounting.

"We have been informed of your treachery," said Lasso Jack, approaching the Englishman and laying his hand upon his shoulder, "and I arrest you as an ally of the prairie freebooters."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the Englishman, with apparent astonishment: "who had the haudacity to tell—"

"I'm the lad that said so," exclaimed Old Dan Dorne, rushing forward and confronting the Englishman, "and I'm willin' to swear that I heard ye plottin' with Texan Terror to come here and get the girls."

"Your 'earing, friend Dan, is keener than your perception," replied Sir George.

"Then ye mean to say that I didn't hear you and Texan Terror talkin' together to-night; that you weren't steppin' 'bout the Indians' camp with yer cane in hand as though you war king o' the kit; that you and Terror didn't mount yer horses and take one apiece for the gals and strike a bee-line fur this place? Jist say that I wern't layin' right clus by and heard all yer plans and talk, and I'll—well, I won't say what I will do."

"I am sorry to say, Dan, you hare as gulli-

ble as the Indians themselves. *Hi hadmit hall* you say is true, but, not once did *hi think* *hof* turning traitor in 'eart. *Hi was honly* to accomplish my release, and stop the vital circulation of that villain, Texan Terror, that *hi* condescended to do what *hi* did."

"Then why did you bring him here to endanger the lives of the girls?" asked Old Dan.

"*hi* knew that probably the girls would be released long before we got 'ere, hand by comin' 'ere alone, *hi* knew *hi* would be equal to 'im in force *hat* the worst. Things turned *hout* just *has* *hi* wanted them to, and there lays the remains *hof* Texan Terror, and 'ere *hare* 'is 'orses to prove that my *hintentions* were good. *If hi ad* thought the girls were 'ere, *hi* would 'ave died before *hi* would been so darned mean has to bring him 'ere. *hi* knew by telling 'im they were concealed 'ere *has* they were, *hit* would make my case stronger."

"I am inclined to think, Dan, that Sir George is telling us the truth—that he has outwitted you as well as Texan Terror."

"By cracky!" exclaimed Old Dan, scratching his frowsy head in perplexity, "I see through the hull thing. I remember when I war listening to Terror and Sir George, that the latter acted a leetle curious and independent. But, I see through it all now, and beg yer pardon, Englisher. I admit you've a purty good tongue to deceive, a face to cloth it in, and the royal grit to back it. Beg your pardon fur 'cusing you of traitorism, and will treat to the best in Santa Fe when we git there. Shake."

The old guide extended his horny palm, and grasping that of the brave, daring Englishman, shook it warmly. Sir George held no ill feeling toward him, for he knew it was human to err.

"Can you tell us any thing about the girls?" asked Lasso Jack.

"Nothing, my young friend. The 'ole was honky when we got 'ere."

"How long since you came here?"

"But a few minutes ago. *hi ad* just cooled the freebooter *hoff* when *hi* eard the clatter *hof* your 'orses' feet coming up the road, hand thinking it might be a pack *hof* Indians, *hi* began making myself scarce. Bnt *hi* soon discovered who it was, hand came back."

"My God!" exclaimed Lasso Jack, "I fear those red Comanche hounds have trailed the maidens to their biding-place, and carried them away."

"Wal, we can look out for their trail," said old Dan. "It may be they have escaped themselves and are wandering about over the plain."

"Then let us to work," said Jack; "the moon is shining bright almost as daylight, and if there is a broad or deep trail, we can easily find it."

Together the young mustanger and old guide moved away a short distance, then began an examination of the ground in a circle about the place.

Their efforts were not in vain. Old Dan soon found where a single horse had traveled north, and from the dark, sinuous trail winding through the dewy grass, he knew the horse had lately traversed the plain. There was nothing by which they could tell whether the horseman had been an Indian or not, but whoever and whichever it was, Indian or white man, they had some reason to believe he had carried the maidens away with him, so the rangers were divided into three parties to travel northward at a distance of a mile apart, and all to meet at a designated point on the river several miles north of them.

Without a minute's hesitation the parties set off over the plain, led by Jourdan, Lasso Jack and Dan Dorne.

They traveled on, and shortly after daylight the three parties met at the designated point on the river.

Lieutenant Jourdan had this information to impart:

"About daybreak I descried a party of three persons, two riding on one horse, and one walking, traveling westward toward the timber. I brought my glass to bear upon them and discovered the two on horseback were women, and—"

"It must be they—Rosalind and Mabel!" exclaimed Jack; "but were they in the power of an Indian?"

"I was just going to say they were guided by a white man who, I thought, resembled Henry St. Elmo in form, but they were too far away to distinguish his features. We tried to attract their attention, but failed. Then we would have endeavored to overtake them, but for a large band of savages that suddenly appeared in view."

"Is our united strength able to cope with them?" asked Jack.

"Yes," replied Jourdan.

"Then let us away!" cried Jack, and turning, the party galloped up the river.

They had traveled about a mile when they were met by a riderless pony that came chargin' down the river through the timber. The pony was caught, but the party could make little of it. They continued on and were suddenly startled by two white men that crept out from under some bushes, nearer dead than alive. They were the two traders who had escaped from that scene of death upon the plain.

"What! is it you, Granger and Hall?" exclaimed Jack, drawing rein before them.

"Yes," replied Granger, "and a bitter time we've had, Jack, since we parted. Hunger, fear and fatigue have about finished us out."

"You shall suffer no longer, boys," said Jack; "we have both food and horses for you."

"Thank God!" said Hall; "but, Jack, I saw the girls with a young white man going through the woods, a few minutes ago."

"What? saw Rosalind and Mabel Garfield?"

"Yes. They seemed to be in a great hurry and we were too weak to overhaul them."

Granger and Hall were at once mounted on a couple of Sir George's extra ponies, then the whole party continued on.

They soon came to where the maidens and Henry St. Elmo had taken to the river. Old Dan readily pointed out the maidens' tracks, and the place where the canoe's prow had been imbedded in the sand. But there were numerous moccasin tracks about, which convinced them that the Indians were between them and the captives.

Old Dan was sent up the river to make a reconnaissance. He soon came back with the following report:

"Thar's slathers of red devils up the river, and they've gone into camp up thar, too. Now, I've made this calculation regardin' the three fugitives: if they *did* take to the river, they're concealed along the shore, not above whar the reds are camped, for I see'd a boat with two o' the varlets comin' down the river, and they'd 'a' met the fugitives in course if they'd continued on above whar t'others are in camp. And now, thar's no place whar the fugitives could hide along either shore below wher they would have met the two warriors, had they continued on, unless it is under a projectin' rock and overhangin' bushes and vines on the south bank, directly opposite of the savages; and if they are there, no tellin' how they're to be got out, unless we go up and drive the savages away, and that might cost us a few lives."

"You are not sure, then, the girls and their rescuer, or companion, are under the rock you speak of?"

"No; thar's too many vines hangin' down over the edge of the rock to see under it."

"Then I shall know within the next hour whether they are under that rock or not!" said Lasso Jack.

"Keep cool now, lad," said Old Dan, "don't let your rashness cost you your skulp."

Jack paid no attention to the injunction of his old friend, but, pressing his horse into the river, swam it across to the opposite shore, where he dismounted, hitched his horse, and by a skillful rearrangement of his buck-skin clothing and the application of some pigments which he always carried about him, in case of emergencies, he converted himself into a tolerable looking Indian.

To Old Dan, who had followed him across the river, he now made known his intention and took his departure up the river.

He had been gone over two hours, when the eagle eye of old Dan, who had been closely watching the current of the river, caught sight of a green leaf drifting down the stream.

"It's all right, boys," said the old guide. "Lasso Jack has found the fugitives, and we're want ed on this side of the river. Come over, men, and let's be off. That large green leaf there is Jack's signal."

The rangers hastily crossed the river; then, ridin' out into the forest, dismounted, hitched their animals, and proceeded with great silence up the stream.

CHAPTER XVII.

OUT OF THE TOILS.

HENRY ST. ELMO and the two maidens could scarcely restrain their emotions of joy and gladness on seeing Lasso Jack before them. But, they knew that their lives were in imminent

peril, and depended entirely upon their silence, and so each one expressed his and her feelings of joy in a silent language as forcibly almost as words could have done. Lasso Jack seemed almost dumbfounded at sight of St. Elmo's face, for he had never expected to see him alive again.

Carefully, with the assistance of Henry, the young mustanger raised himself into the canoe, and taking a seat before his friends, said in a low whisper:

"We are in imminent peril, friends, as you doubtless see, but we have friends below here that will come to our assistance just as soon as I can communicate with them."

"But, how will it be done without leaving here, Jack?" asked Henry.

"This way," said Jack, taking a large green leaf and dropping it into the river.

Henry saw at once what his intentions were, for the eddying current whirled the leaf outward from the dense shadows of the rock into the middle of the river—and it was carried away on the bosom of the stream.

Jack kept a close watch upon the savages on the opposite shore, for he felt no little fears of the keen eyes of the foe detecting his mute messenger.

But, he breathed freer when he saw it float down the river unobserved; and then he turned to Rosalind and conversed with her in low whispers. He soon learned how they had escaped from their hiding-place on the prairie, after suffering hours of agony in what they had come to regard as a living tomb.

Jack then narrated the perilous adventures that had detained him, and prevented him from fulfilling his promise in returning to their release. Henry, also, told Jack how he had made his mysterious disappearance from his animal's back on that memorable day that opens our story.

And thus they passed the time until they were suddenly startled by the tread of feet, mingled with a wild shout above them.

They saw the savages leap to their feet startled with sudden terror. They saw them grasp their weapons and prepare to defend themselves. But, the next instant the crash of three-score rifles and carbines rang out on the rock above them, and three-score bullets whistled across the river into the savages' midst. A yell of death and terror pealed from the red foes' lips as they beat a hasty retreat under cover of the woods.

"Now is our time, Henry!" exclaimed Jack.

Henry plied the oar and sent the craft out from under the rock; then, skirting along the shore a few rods, finally reached a point where an easy landing was effected.

The next minute the little band was in the midst of the rangers. They were safe once more!

Two weeks later found Rosalind and Mabel Garfield safely in Santa Fe with their brother.

Lasso Jack and Henry St. Elmo, accompanied by Old Dan, Sir George and an escort under Lieutenant Jourdan, had carried them safely through to their journey's end.

St. Elmo never went back to the prairies of Texas as a mustanger, but married Mabel and became a partner with his brother-in-law in the mercantile business.

But, Lasso Jack lingered only a few days at Santa Fe. He went back to his wild life as a mustanger on the prairies. He heard, however, every few weeks of the year that followed, from his betrothed, Rosalind Garfield. At length, however, the prairies and the excitement attending the hunting of wild horses lost all their charm to him, and he was found drifting Santa-Fe-ward.

A year later Rosalind became his bride, and with the means accumulated as a mustanger, he was enabled to go into business, the happiest of happy men, with a cheerful little help-mate to share with him life's ills and joys alike.

Sir George Richardson never proposed to Rosalind, for he had sense enough to spare himself from the pangs of rejection. He traveled extensively in America and wedded an English lady, in every respect worthy of his love. He is now a prosperous man in one of the Western States, and should you ever wish to see him and hear his great and wonderful stories of his adventures on the prairies of Texas, just drop in at his elegant residence and have your desires gratified, for Sir George is no mythical being, dear reader.

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